Circus Bella veteran juggler and â??right-hand manâ?? keeps his family in on the act

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Lots of parents talk about juggling responsibilities when it comes to their kids. Not so many literally juggle their kids. Carlo Gentile is one of the few.

With much experience as a juggler, clown, unicyclist and diabolo artist, Gentile is now booking and production manager for Circus Bella, a â??fiercely homegrownâ?• San Francisco-based circus, where performed with his wife and four children for many years.

Carlo Gentile, whose family act joined Circus Bella in 2013, performs these days with his 9-year-old daughter, Giusseppina. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Chinese foot juggling is an ancient art centered around moving objects and people with the feet while lying down. Asked what his young children did when they performed with the circus, he said, â??They were the things flying off my feet.â?•

The Yerba Buena Gardens Festival this weekend includes three free peformances by Circus Bella: Hoopla. Noon â?? 1 p.m. Friday and noon and 2:15 p.m. Saturday on the Great Lawn, Mission Street between 3rd & 4th streets.

This Friday and Saturday, the circus will put on three free performances during the Yerba Buena Gardens Festival. Gentile will be there with his 9-year-old daughter Giusy as well as at other Circus Bella shows this summer.

â??Sheâ??s doing handstands on my feet, standing on my shoulders, nothing too outrageous. Weâ??re also hoping it will be comedic.â?•

His oldest son, Gianluca, now 18, performed a solo juggling act solo with Circus Bella a couple of years ago. But heâ??s since settled into other high school-aged pursuits, like wrestling and chess. He also studies aviation, Gentile said.

Itâ??s a family affair

He has two more daughters, Giulia,16, and Gioia,13. All four will be working in some capacity this summer with Circus Bella, which offers free performances in Bay Area parks. The circus includes about 10 performers and 10 people working behind the scenes. Itâ??s funded primarily through community block and development grants.

Gentile calls himself the circusâ??s â??right-hand manâ?• for the many tasks that he does, including performing. (Photo by Kirk Marsh, 2024)

The family joined Circus Bella in 2013, living in aa trailer nd traveling around the Bay Area and beyond as they performed for the circus. But the couple divorced in 2020 and Gentile now lives in West Oakland.

Gentileâ??s role at Circus Bella involves just about everything, from rigging circus tents to finding a new ticketing agency. For his plethora of tasks for Circus Bella, Gentile adopted the title â??right-hand man.â?• He said he is also a â??kind of a sounding boardâ?• for Abigail Munn, who runs the circus.

â??I am a company member. I am an ensemble member. Circus Bella is my full-time job, and I mostly handle operational things and admin stuff that goes on year-round, mostly booking and production,â?• he said.

He deals with all the ticketing and travel for the circus, from booking hotels rooms to figuring out whoâ??s driving with whom en route to a new location.

He also has produced flyers and other artistic materials for the various circuses heâ??s worked for. Although he doesnâ??t consider himself a graphic artist, he is proficient in creative software and can code HTML websites.

Carlo and Guisy in a complex configuration with other member of the circus. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

On his own time, he likes to cook, and as his juggling performances wind down, he wants to play more pickleball**.**

â??I do perform. Theyâ??re small bits and I am honestly very excited about performing with one of my kids again.

Carlo Gentile chatting with the crew during a rehearsal. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

It took a while before he became a sophisticated circus performer. He started his training as a young man in St. Louis, Missouri, where he grew up with three younger brothers. His father sold electronic equipment and his mother was a travel agent.

â??A small circus show came to my high school and it was about the same time I learned to juggleâ?• (with his hands). After graduation, he tried out and got in the Royal Lichtenstein circus, which was based in San Jose at the time. For room and board, he traveled around the country with the group learning circus skills.

A theater scholarship

The man who ran it was a Jesuit priest at Santa Clara University, which hosted the circus when it wasnâ??t traveling. Gentile had attended a Jesuit high school but didnâ??t commit to college until after he had toured with the circus for a couple of years until he got a theater scholarship at Santa Clara University. He graduated with a bachelor of artsâ?? degree in Italian language and literature.

Gentile backstage with the circus equipment. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

â??I met my wife there. She didnâ??t have a circus background, but we did decide to work on this circus thing together,â?• he said. â??We were experimenting with what kind of acts we could do together.â?•

After a lot of experimentation, they settled on foot juggling, which Gentile, now 55, had learned on two trips to China in the early 2000s. He started with juggling objects, then advanced to people.

â??You lie on your back with your feet up in the air. In Acroyoga, they call this an L- based position,â?• he said. â??You basically kick or slip or spin objects or people.â?•

Juggling objects is known as antipodism and juggling people is known as Risley, named after a guy in the 1800s who popularized it, he added.

Their mentors were three French brothers, the Les Castors, foot jugglers who played across Europe and in the U.S., most notably with Teatro ZinZanni in San Francisco, where Gentil first saw their act, and Seattle.

> Gentile and his family circus act too their inspiration from Les Castors foot jugglers. (YouTube)

â??When I first saw them they were in their 50s and I said to myself â??thatâ??s what I want to be doing, an act with longevity.â?•

Before joining Circus Bella, Gentile served as an artistic director for CircEsteem in Chicago, an organization devoted to helping disadvantaged young people develop confidence as they learn circus skills.

Young circus troupes

He also helped form the American Youth Circus Organization, which governs many young circus troupes, those consisting of 14- to 20-year-olds. â??There are literally hundreds of these groups across the nation,â?• Gentile said. â??Itâ??s really exploded in the last 25 to 30 years.â?•

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Circus Ringmaster Abigail Munn. (Photo by Colin Campell)

And from 2004 to 2018, Gentile worked with ZoppÃ©, an â??old world family circusâ?• with a 180-year history. He also worked with Circus Bella in the latter years because both circuses had different yearly schedules.

He works part-time at two other organizations: a summer circus camp he founded called 888 Monkeys and at La Scuola SF, an international elementary school in the Bay Area. He cuts back on that, he said, when Circus Bella is performing.

Circus Bella plays 11 different locations this summer, mostly in the Bay Area. But theyâ??ll perform in Reno July 12 and 13.

Gentile is hoping to expand the venues.

â??Iâ??m working hard as the booking manager to fix that but nothingâ??s panned out yet,â?• he said.

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