



Folklife Festival Kicks Off 50 Years

Posted by [Chad Jimenez](#) / 02 Jul 2017

Thursday marked the 50th anniversary of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. This 10 day event celebrates history and culture with music, performances, food and exhibits. This years theme focused on the Circus Arts and On the Move: Migration Across Generations.

With her face painted in colorful clown makeup, Jackie Davis was working at one of the circus tents and is a part of [Circus Smirkus](#), a youth circus company in Greensboro, Vermont. Davis said she is part of the circus arts education team which brings the circus arts to schools and uses the circus as a tool to teach life skills.

Davis said she is enjoying how the theme of the Folklife Festival is bringing national attention to the circus arts.

"The Ringling Brothers recently had to close its doors, so people are like, 'Oh, is circus dying? Is circus an old art?'," Davis said. "It's actually not true at all. In fact, there's more grassroots circus activities now than possibly ever before, so it's really quite vibrant. So to have it at this moment in history is extraordinary."

For Davis, she said she hopes that people become aware that circus is bigger than what conceptions they may have about the circus. It's a changing and living art, Davis said, so she hopes that people become aware that the circus is changing and is available to everyone.

"That was sort of the message of my presentation," Davis said. "[the circus] can be a career path, not just as a performer, but there are people doing circus as teachers, circus therapy, helping people with disabilities, there is circus for at-risk populations called social circus that works with inner-city youth or kids who are marginalized. It really has many, many applications than just what you think of as a performance art."

The festival, which takes place from June 29 to July 4 and from July 6 to July 9, showcases juggling acts, trapeze artists defying gravity, colorful clowns, and an array of diverse food options. Taking place on the National Mall, across from the Smithsonian Castle, the festival is a great opportunity to learn about the culture of the circus arts as well as how the American culture has been shaped by the immigration within the country.

A schedule of events can be found on the [Smithsonian website](#). With shows,

performances, demonstrations and workshops proceeding throughout the day at different locations across the festival, there are many opportunities to experience the diversity of the festival.

Bekka Stasny is an educator with [Circus Arts Conservatory](#) and are participating in the festival teaching circus acts and the science behind them. With many props for showcasing tricks, Stasny explains how the acts all focus around gravity, force and motion. They also teach circus lingo so people can gain a better understanding of the terminology that Stasny uses.

"It is fun," Stasny said. "It really shows hands-on application of concepts that kids don't get all the time."

She said she hopes kids will learn that engineering and building doesn't need to be scary. You can be an engineer if you build and you can try and try again and if you fail, you can learn from your mistakes and try again, Stasny said.

"We really want to show kids that it is OK to fail and that if they persist, they will end up being successful," Stasny said.

The amount of different circus acts is what Stasny said she has enjoyed the most so far. She said she has experienced nothing like this before, "and for circus", educators and artists from around the world and showing their craft is really amazing."

"This shows that the circus is not just entertainment but an art form and that you can learn from it," Stasny said.

With attention to the circus arts through this festival, "The Greatest Showman" is an upcoming musical drama featuring Hugh Jackman, Zac Efron, Michelle Williams, Rebecca Fergusson and Zendaya. Releasing Christmas 2017, this movie focuses on the story of P.T. Barnum, the founder of the world famous traveling Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.