

Up and away

Alex Bernard fulfills a childhood dream to fly high on the trapeze

When I was little my Dad took me to the circus. I became hysterical watching the lions and tigers being made to jump through rings of fire, having whips cracked at them, but then I calmed down, becoming mesmerised by the people on the flying trapeze. And now I've had the chance to fulfill a life-long ambition - I

have run away and joined the circus!

I've walked past the Stores Building in front of the Brisbane Powerhouse, home to the Vulcana Women's Circus, since I first moved to Brisbane in 1996. And every time I went past I would gaze in the window and see women of all ages spinning, tumbling, swinging through the air, using hula-hoops, juggling...it was amazing! So when they offered a Come and Try night I knew it was my destiny to attend. So I, along with around 20 other very enthusiastic women from all walks of life, turned up to try my hand at the circus life.

The workshops are run four times a year offering a variety of classes, such as circus essentials, aerial skills and object manipulation skills (juggling and hula-hoops). There are also a couple of special one-off workshops like "Fire" where you can try your hand at poi and staff twirling, as well as fire-eating (optional, which is probably for the best) in a fun, safe and supportive environment. But ladies, be warned! It's a really tough workout.

To my amazement I discovered that I have a freakish aptitude for the trapeze, but I failed juggling because I have the attention span of a gnat. I also met some really great women.

Carol Jelly, 57, took up circus three and a half years ago and, by her own admission, became addicted. "I found Vulcana through the Brisbane City Council's Real Adventure Women program and just absolutely loved it. I was good at gymnastics as a teenager and have always been active. It's such a wonderfully supportive environment for women and totally inclusive," says Carol. And it's the mental benefits that also keep her coming back for more. "It's so empowering! I love going to class and won't accept invitations if they clash with Vulcana. And with the skills that are required for various disciplines, it's a great leveller. Age doesn't make a difference."

General manager of Vulcana Women's

Circus Katie Walters says the running of Vulcana reflects their philosophy.

"We are non-hierarchical, with a flat structure where each person is invested and respected as a leader in their field. It all sounds very hippy-ish, but it works, and we consider each other almost as family."

Vulcana takes their workshops to marginalised

communities, which Walter says is very powerful and positive experience. "Circus has a cultural history of embracing people who haven't been embraced by the mainstream for whatever reason, and I think Vulcana keeps that in mind with our community work. Yes, it's an art form, but it's also a tool - for building confidence, feeling good about yourself and what you can do, for taking risks in a healthy way. And that's before we even get started on the benefits of physical exercise!"

Myrna De Arce, 52, joined Vulcana in 2008 after being inspired by the gorgeous figures of the women who used to come to her restaurant. "They had these amazing, sculpted bodies and one of the girls invited me to see a showcase, and I was hooked! I didn't even know you could do circus as a hobby. It's really exotic," she says.

Her disciplines are trapeze, tissu (also known as aerial skills) where you perform acrobatics while hanging from special fabric and lyra, an aerial ring made of steel suspended from the roof. "It's so feminine and elegant but it's also really hard. The confidence you get is different too. I can go 25 metres in the air performing tricks, so now I think 'Well, how hard can other things be?'"

Artistic director Veronica Neave says the impact can be truly life altering. "I've seen it change many peoples' lives, I saw one of our students in the space the other day with a t-shirt on that she had made and it said 'Circus is my Cure'. I asked her what she meant by it and she told me that her rheumatoid specialist had said that Vulcana was a very important part of her managing her chronic health condition."

And anyone can do circus. Vulcana has ladies attending well into their 60s who are flying - literally. "I'm sure that at one point they thought they were too old to try but they proved themselves wrong. It really is for everyone because there are so many different activities in circus and different people are drawn to different things," Neave says.



Erica Newby flies high on the aerial ring

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