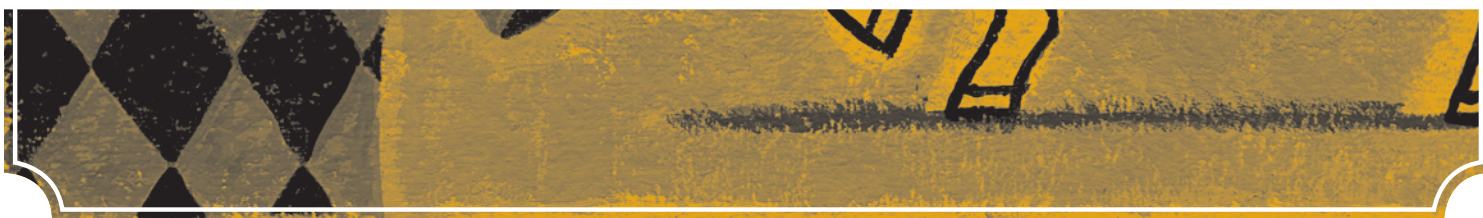




A CIRCUS LIFE

Lillian Marsh, Class of 2009, knows about the road less traveled



BACK STAGE, SEVEN-YEAR-OLD LILY MARSH SWUNG HER BODY BACK AND FORTH ON THE TRAPEZE, TWISTING AND CURLING AS SHE TIGHTLY GRASPED THE BAR.

NOT FAR AWAY, IN THE CENTER RING OF THE CIRCUS, **THE SPOTLIGHT SHONE ON HER MOTHER, CECIL MACKINNON**, WHO CLOWNED, TUMBLED AND JUGGLED TO THE ROAR OF A LARGE CROWD.

AS MARSH CONTINUED TO SWING AND TWIRL BACKSTAGE, SHE SUDDENLY LOST HER GRIP AND FELL, **SMASHING HER HEAD ON THE CONCRETE FLOOR BELOW.**

BY MEGHAN HOLOHAN

Because her mother was performing in every act that night, she couldn't be called on to help her daughter, so other women in the circus stepped in, taking turns comforting Marsh, who was dazed and in pain.

Increasingly concerned, one of the women tried to signal MacKinnon to let her know that her daughter had injured herself. MacKinnon had no choice but to stay in the ring and finish the show, but immediately after she rushed her daughter to the emergency room.

When Marsh was finally seen by a doctor, he suspected she had a concussion and so urged her mother to let her stay the night so that she could be observed.

Marsh, who today is a third-year student in the School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, says she will never forget the stares her mother received at the hospital that night, still dressed in her ornate costume and her face heavily made-up. Nor will she forget the anxiety she sensed in her mother as she confronted the reality of life without a health-care safety net.

Like most other circus performers, Marsh and MacKinnon were uninsured, so being admitted to the hospital meant bills that MacKinnon couldn't afford to pay.

That night, therefore, MacKinnon decided not to leave her daughter at the hospital, but instead took her home with her.

"It's kind of like you are not a part of the health-care system," says Marsh today.

"No one had primary care, and it was all very mystifying. Yet everyone [in the circus] was constantly either sick or injured.

"Growing up, I remember spending a lot of time waiting in public clinics, often one being worse than the next," she continues. "I think everyone should have access to health care, and I think that medical students and doctors have a responsibility not just to the disease processes, but to people and their communities as well."

NO FAMILY HISTORY

While many children raised in the circus come from families who have performed for generations, Marsh's mother wasn't born into the circus life. As a young woman, MacKinnon began juggling on the streets for a living, both in Chicago (her hometown) and New York City. One day a circus owner saw her act and asked her to join his show. She signed on, and from that day forward she traveled across the country in a small trailer, performing with his circus and various others.

If MacKinnon was to earn her place in the show, however, it meant she would perform even when she was nine months pregnant.

Marsh explains that her mother was in three shows the day before she gave birth to her at a low-cost midwives' clinic at San Francisco General Hospital.

"It was the Fourth of July," she says, "which is a big day in the circus world. My mom says she felt great that day and she was happy to be performing."

A week after giving birth to Marsh on July 5, mother and child were back on the road, headed to Alaska.

As soon as she could walk, Marsh began to perform, dancing or being tossed in the air to be caught or set down atop a human pyramid. To enraptured audiences, stunts such as these seem death defying, but to Marsh, her childhood acts are not risky when compared with those that her circus family and friends perform daily.

Over the years, all four of her siblings participated in shows along with her. Today, only Melinda, 37, and Jack, 22, still perform. Melinda is an aerialist and dancer, and Jack juggles and is an acrobat. Her oldest sister Piper, 43, is a stay-at-home mom, and her brother Nick, 23, lives in Argentina.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

In addition to her biological family, Marsh was surrounded and supported by her circus family. She explains that many performers hailed from Italy, Columbia and Kazakhstan, and so she grew up hearing a cacophony of broken English and Romance languages.

She says she has circus aunts, uncles, and cousins from many different countries and recalls that "everyone took care of one another." Children ran free on the back lot, painted their faces with make-up, dressed in costumes, peeked out to look at performers, or explored the grounds.

Often, as performers waited to go on stage, they played backstage, sometimes

becoming so immersed in their games, they almost missed their cues. At other times, they practiced their performances with the children or took them to visit the horses or elephants.

“In the circus, everyone comes together from different backgrounds and ideologies; they are very project oriented and all are working hard together to put on a show,” says Marsh. “You get to know people from working with them, and it’s really intimate. It is very satisfying to work toward a common goal in such diverse surroundings.”

Toward evening, the smell of charcoal often permeated the air as folks started up grills to prepare feasts for after the show, when all the performers, crew and families gathered to enjoy their meal together, singing, laughing and drinking. It wasn’t unusual for them to stay up until the early hours of the morning before going to bed and getting up to start all over again.

“This is life on a show,” says Marsh, who adds that, despite the support and camaraderie of such a tight-knit community, the circus world is a microcosm of the larger world.

It’s not unusual for performers to struggle with alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression, among other things, she explains. Injury and chronic pain are byproducts of their high-risk profession, and job security is dependent on their physical prowess, which, for many, peaks at about age 35.

For example, while MacKinnon still performs in the circus, her act is now primarily limited to juggling and directing. “Her days of standing on shoulders or riding animals are over,” says Marsh.

Throughout her childhood and early adolescence, Marsh visited every state with her family except Louisiana and Hawaii; however, due to their rigorous schedules, most circus performers don’t leave the lots they camp on.

“So, even though I’ve been in almost every state, I really haven’t seen the sights,” she says.

THE PATH OF MOST RESISTANCE

Like the other children she was raised with, Marsh took correspondence courses through the fifth grade to complete her schoolwork. Many of the parents in the circus have had little or no formal education themselves, so are unable to provide the children with substantive home schooling. As a result, some of the performers are barely literate, says Marsh.

In the circus life, she further explains, age 12 marks a crossroads at which education is pushed even farther into the background.

It is at this age—when muscles begin to develop and grow rapidly—that children must make a choice to either follow in their parents’ footsteps and start training seriously for a performance career, or else choose a life outside the circus, which means going to school in a conventional setting.



few years before turning 12, Marsh had begun to give indications that the circus life might not be the path she would choose for herself.

Despite her mother’s urgings, she refused to learn how to juggle and join her act. Yet, at the same time, she was aware that leaving the circus would be the ultimate rebellion since everyone she knew was choosing to stay.

The conflict was tremendous, but over time it was her best friend, Denayde, who helped her resolve it.

Denayde grew up in a family of high-wire artists and fliers—trapeze artists. For eight generations, everyone in her family trained to be sleek and flexible so they could sail through the air.

When Denayde started to train, however, she found she couldn’t fly and contort her body as others in her family did. Scoliosis curved her spine, making it almost impossible for her to perform the tricks.

Denayde had no choice, says Marsh; she had to perform in the circus.

“The only thing she can do is walk the wire,” she explains. “But circus owners want performers who can do a variety of acts, so because she can do only one thing, it makes her less employable.”

Contemplating her friend’s dilemma Marsh realized that she, in contrast, could determine her future.

“None of my friends had the option of staying in one place like I did,” she adds.

THE WIDER WORLD

Marsh followed through on her convictions and left the circus life to attend public school in New York City while living with relatives and her father, who is a musician in the city.

While in high school, she continued performing and training and once she graduated, she again faced a choice: performance or college?

Again, she chose school, graduating from Swarthmore College in 2001 with a

degree in biological anthropology.

While in college, she discovered that she loved learning and ended up choosing the major she did because it was an eclectic, interdisciplinary path that allowed her to explore the many subjects that appealed to her. Although at first she struggled to keep up with her college classmates, many of whom had attended private high schools, Marsh eventually hit her stride and more than held her own in courses that included biology, ecology, philosophy and political science.

After college, she became a Renaissance woman of sorts, working a wide variety of jobs while completing post-baccalaureate work at New York University.

It was during this time that Marsh says she was fortunate to have met the late Ronald Davidson, MD, an internist who had offices in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

“Dr. Davidson’s far-reaching and radical practice—which consisted of basic-science research, entrepreneurship, teaching, patient care and community outreach—inspired me. He mentored me in terms of my career goals and provided academic support and personal encouragement,” she says. “He made me believe I could pursue a medical career.”

With his recommendation, Marsh applied to several medical schools and received an offer to study in Cuba through a program started by President Fidel Castro aimed at providing free medical training, room and board to low-income Americans.

In 2004, she entered Escuela Latino Americana de Medicina, where she stayed for a year before being accepted to UB’s School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

She describes the experience in Cuba as both “moving and challenging,” explaining that students were isolated from friends and families and had to stand in line for rationed meals.

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“Most of the students I studied with came from areas where medical care was a luxury,” she says. “Everyone was dedicated to learning the science of medicine and to using it as a tool for social change.”

Although Marsh did not complete her degree in Cuba, she did appreciate the exposure she had to the country’s system of socialized medicine and often pondered how such a system could benefit her circus family back in America.

Finances had always been a hurdle for Marsh when contemplating medical school in the United States, so when UB offered her a scholarship—naming her the Pasquale A. Greco, MD, and Joseph M. Greco, MD, Scholar—it made all the difference.

“Finances definitely factored into my decision about where I felt I could attend medical school,” says Marsh. “I really didn’t want to leave school with loans that would limit my ability to work in humble communities. When UB offered me the Greco scholarship, I realized that it was a school that would support me in my efforts to achieve my goals.”

In addition to the scholarship support she received, she says she was drawn to UB’s medical school because of its organ-based curriculum and the opportunity

she has to work with underserved communities through such projects as the student-run Lighthouse Free Clinic on Buffalo’s east side.

She has also enjoyed exploring Buffalo and finds its history interesting and architecture beautiful. In general, Marsh says medical school at UB has been a very good fit for her and the culmination of a long-term aspiration to provide for herself and for her circus community, as well as other underserved populations.

“I like learning the secrets of how the body works and trying to figure out the best way to explain pathophysiology to patients in a way they will understand,” she reflects.

No matter how much education Marsh has, however, she never moves too far away from performing. Five years ago, she joined in her mother’s act along with her sister Melinda.

“I love to perform, and I’m comfortable being in front of a big group of people,” she says.

Once Marsh completes her medical training, she hopes to join the circus again, but this time as a physician. She’s not quite sure how she’ll do it, but she’d like to provide health care to those whom she knows need it but don’t have it, even at the most basic level.

“Not many in the circus world have health insurance or access to a doctor,” she says. “Right now I don’t know what specialization would be the most useful for the circus, but it’s something I think a lot about,” she says. “My mom and I talk about my getting a little trailer and attaching it to hers. I would love to practice on the road for part of my time.”

Who knows, perhaps her dream of literally coupling health-care services to the needs of the community is a goal Marsh has been destined to fulfill from the start. **BP**



Lillian Marsh