

Folk and Traditional Arts Awards (2013-2015)

Category: National Heritage Fellowship

Fiscal year 2015 (\$25,000)

Background

The National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowships, the nation's highest honor in the folk and traditional arts, are awarded annually to those artists making a significant impact in the field. In 2015, Dolly Jacobs was awarded a fellowship for her work as a circus aerialist, the first circus performer to be so honored. And how do the circus arts fit as a folk and traditional art form?



Dolly Jacobs performing at the 2015 National Heritage Fellowships Concert. Photo by Michael G. Stewart

Circuses blend a variety of art forms—from dance to music to theater—requiring the same skill sets of costuming, performance, athleticism, and choreography as those arts. In addition, like many of the folk arts, circuses are affordable and reach extremely diverse audiences in communities both urban and rural.

Jacobs and her husband, Pedro Reis, co-founded the Circus Arts Conservatory (CAC) in Sarasota, Florida, in order to continue the traditions she learned from family members. Her father, the legendary Lou Jacobs, was an internationally famous circus clown who dedicated more than 60 years of his life to the circus. Her godmother, Margie Geiger, performed acrobatic maneuvers on the Roman rings and passed the art form on to Jacobs. She continues to pass down the circus arts through the Sailor Circus program, one of the oldest circus schools in America, which CAC now runs. Sailor Circus' outreach includes working with area schools and local community nursing homes and retirement centers.

Jacobs feels the circus arts provide a means of interacting with and enhancing the communities they work in. As she explains:

"...it's not just doing the tricks and walking in, it's also learning to communicate with the audience without words and [making] them feel that they're flying with you...It's wonderful to know that you're taking people on a ride with you. I think that's the pinnacle of it, is being able to touch those people that are sitting out there. For a few minutes of their life, they've kind of left all their other worries and [they go] on a journey with you."

Perceived Impact of the National Heritage Fellowship

Often the circus is regarded poorly in the media, which Jacobs believes is due to misinterpretation and lack of knowledge. She acknowledges that receiving the National Heritage Fellowship in 2015 has helped to present the profession in a more positive light and helped to elevate the profile of the circus arts as a legitimate art form.

Jacobs chose to invest the monetary award that came with the fellowship in CAC's programs so they could make the most difference in the art form. In addition to education and training, CAC hosts annual performances to showcase professional circus performers—where Jacobs continues to perform breathtaking feats, dancing high in the air on the Roman rings.

*"It's my life's mission to do that [give credit to the great circus artists and their contributions to the industry] and to keep this art form alive and thriving, and to teach kids how to get that incredible feeling of self-accomplishment that nothing else can replace."
– Dolly Jacobs*



Dolly Jacobs coaching a student at the Sailor Circus.
Photo by Daniel Perales

This sample grant was developed by the National Endowment for the Arts as part of "Living Traditions," a report that examines the agency's grant and fellowship awards in the Folk & Traditional Arts program between 2013-2015. The full report is available for free as a downloadable PDF at www.arts.gov.