

See u down the road: Episode 1: Elliana Hentoff-Killian

Book Kennison: Welcome to the Circus Voices podcast, from circustalk.com. I'm Book Kennison.

You're listening to *see u down the road*. True circus stories, told by the artists who lived them. On today's episode: Elliana Hentoff-Killian. Elliana is an aerialist and acrobat from St. Louis, Missouri. In 2012, when she was just 20 years old, Elliana signed a two-year contract with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, becoming one of the youngest human cannonballs in the show's history. But, as we'll soon hear, Elliana got injured, and wasn't able to complete the contract. Here's Elliana Hentoff-Killian.

Elliana Hentoff-Killian: I have not shot out of a cannon in six years. And I still, to this day, have a dream every now and again where I'm in the cannon, and the countdown is going, and I'm not ready. And it's just like *oh my gosh, it's going to happen, I have to get ready like have to get ready*—and it's never like the shot, or landing badly, or anything like that, it's like I'm the in the barrel, listening to Nadia in my head going *five, four*—and I'm like, "I'm not ready, I'm not ready!"

My training process, how it was described to me, was: *This is what's going to happen: stay tight and look at the bag and then flip over. Squeeze all your muscles. Look at the bag and then you will naturally turn over and land in the bag.* There's not a lot of like...talent to it, I guess. It's just staying tight. Cannon is completely mental. It's like all mental ability. I mean, you have to be strong, but you don't have to learn a lot of stuff, you just have to squeeze all your muscles and hope for the best.

So they were just looking for somebody that the audience could relate to, that looked like somebody they might know from school, or from the grocery store, and I fit that bill pretty, pretty well.

I wasn't allowed to get into the cannon until I signed a two-year contract. So I literally signed my life away and had no idea what I was signing up for. How it was explained to me—because that made me really nervous—was *if you're really bad at it, like, we'll fire you so we can break the contract.* I was like OK, great. So I went. Brian Miser was my coach and then Nadia and Dima were part of my cannon team. Nadia was my fire-er, like she would fire the cannon, so she was the voice inside my head. And then Dima helped with just everything, he was her husband. I did high falls and Miser made me run stairs. Because you have to have strong legs, and there were always stairs available because we were in buildings. Normally in practice it would be like four or five shots. I was doing like eight-plus in most practices. It was really intense, because another girl had been there for three months already and it hadn't worked out, so what should have taken six months I did in three. Or was able to do in three? I don't know, forced to do in three? It happened in three.

I get shot, and I fly across the arena. I am not connected to anything, I'm not, you know, on wires or safety lines or anything like that. And then I do a half turn onto my back. So it's a lot of

force into your body—you just want to get as strong as you possibly can so that you can take that force and use it for propulsion, and not to just like be jello have it like, go through you. So you land on a big air bag. It's comfortable, like t it doesn't hurt when you land if you do it properly. If you do it wrong, yeah it hurts, but if you do it properly it's just like jumping on a bed.

So my issue from the beginning when I was shooting was, I would drop my left shoulder. My left shoulder would drop, so I would end up turning a little bit as I would land, so instead of landing flat I would land a little bit on my left side. It had been kind of off-and-on for a few weeks, so at that point we had been talking about adding extra practices to try and try and correct it. But it was just—you know, I would have days where it was exciting and fun to do cannon, and then I had days were I realized how crazy I was for getting into a cannon and getting shot, you know, 75 feet and 40 feet in the air, with no net, and nothing underneath me, and that starts to mess with your head sometimes.

I got injured in Colorado Springs, which was about six months into tour. I had been with Ringling for about nine months, at that point, and it was well over my 300th shot or something—I had done tons and tons of shots by the time I got injured.

One day, it was the second show of a three-show Saturday. I over-rotated—so what that means is, I went into the bag, instead of onto my back, I went in on my feet. So all of the power that was supposed to be spread out across my body went directly into my ankles. And I had taped them both, because I had been hitting a little hard, which probably saved me from dislocation, is what the doctor said. Instead I landed, and I knew that I had landed really badly, I knew something was wrong. And I was supposed to run the entire length of the arena floor after the shot, and I got up, and I'm like, looking around—and people help you out of the bag, so I wasn't—I didn't have to put weight on my feet, luckily—I'm like looking around and I'm like okay how do I— I can't run. And there was a vom door like directly in front of me, so the spotlight goes across the arena and I take off right out the door. And then one of the floor crew guys—John Antoni, he knew something was wrong, and he was the first one who got to me. He was an old acrobat, and he started pulling off my boots and trying to see what was going on.

I went to urgent care, and they X-rayed it and everything, but it was too swollen to see anything, so the official diagnosis was I tore most of the tendons in my right ankle, and sprained the left one kind of slightly, but not as bad. But that was it—just torn tendons. So we decided—like Ringling and I decided—it would be best for me to go home and heal with my doctors and my physical therapist, which is what I did, and that was really great—it was nice to be home and not have the stress of traveling and having different doctors each week, because you're not going to see the same person.

It was taking longer than it should have. There's a lot of thought that maybe I should have had surgery on it, but the call was made not to, originally, and so I didn't. They played St. Louis, and my goal was to be back by St. Louis because I really wanted to play my hometown. I talked my doctor into signing off on my ankle and I went into the PT, who is a friend of mine, and she says *you got the doctor to sign off, so there's nothing I can do to stop you, but you're going to*

damage it more if you go back when it's not fully healed. So I had to make the decision to not play St. Louis, which was heartbreaking, but long-term it was the right decision. Finally—my goal after that was to get back in, and I did, I made it back to practice when they were in Chicago and shot a few more times. Because I didn't just want that mental block of just never getting in the cannon again.

Ringling is— or was I guess, because it's not around anymore—is a big enough name in show business that their model—their like, employment model essentially—was *we can always find a replacement for you*. So there was never an idea of like, *they won't get rid of me because I'm me*—it's like no, there's like 16 other girls that they're happy to, you know, hire and probably pay less than you. So there was always that looming idea that you could get fired.

I knew—I knew it was coming. My costume was already being re-done for the new girl. So, it wasn't a surprise. Then I rode the train down to Florida and we had the meeting on the train. They just came to my room and were like OK, that's it, sign these papers. And yeah, that's how it went down. Not that I thought that there was a chance that they would've kept me on, but like I couldn't leave until I had gotten that paperwork and I wasn't gonna get that until Florida. Then I flew back to St. Louis and I quit circus.

I had gained a lot of weight when I had been injured, and before that as well. And Ringling is pretty notorious for how they like their girls to look. So you know, part of it was injury and part of it was just like my body type wasn't what they wanted, and that was a really hard thing to deal with, at 22, to realize you can get fired essentially—not officially—but for how you look. I didn't want to be in a business where that was how things were done—but I am.

Since the beginning, they were “encouraging” me to be a little bit lighter, and in Winter Quarters it was really easy to do that, because you're just in one place, you have time to work out, you have a lot of food options—it was really easy to shed that weight. But once you're on tour, it's like, you don't always have access to a good grocery store, there's not always time to work out or to do stuff, if you're stuck on a train for three days it's challenging to work out in a meaningful way. And I was young, and didn't know what I was doing, and I did a lot of very unhealthy things to get to the way they wanted me to look.

I said to hell with it all and decided to be a normal person in society. I got a job being the recruitment assistant at the Psychoanalytic Institute in St. Louis, and I was a hostess at a sushi restaurant for a while, and I helped this headband company—like I did all these really random jobs for about a year. And then one of my friends was opening a flying trapeze rig, and needed a girl. I had never been on a rig before, and he was like, look I just need a girl to come out and stand on the board and work the board—like it's not really circus, you're not really getting back into the business, just do me this favor, kind of thing. And that's how I got pulled back in.

Ringling stuck around for another two years after I came off it. The elephants left the next year, and that was really hard to see happen, and then the next year they closed. And, you know, I feel lucky that I didn't have to go through that, I was already off, I wasn't part of it anymore. But it was really, truly devastating to watch. That's like over 600 people we're talking about without a

job, essentially overnight. I know a lot of people who are still trying to recover from that happening to them.

I started working again about a year and a half after Ringling. It took me a long time to feel as confident on stage as I used to, and to really get that same pleasure from it. I have a one-woman show that I perform. It's something that I enjoy, and something I have a lot of control over. It's all about a bad break-up, and a lot of the emotional stuff that I use in the show is actually from Ringling, it's not from a romantic relationship, which is kind of funny.

I was super young when I went on, I was only 20, and so green—like, really so green. And it was an eye-opening experience that I think helped with my growth a lot, as far as becoming more mature, but it also like, you know, did some damage, I guess. If I had to do it over again, I would do things differently, that's for sure. But I would do it again. Which is probably crazy.

I would stand up for myself, I think a lot more, just be more assertive about what I was willing to put up with and what I wouldn't put up with, I think would be the first thing. The biggest thing.

Book: Thanks to Elliana Hentoff-Killian for talking to us.

see u down the road is produced by me and Zoë Kennison.

Our executive producer is CircusTalk.

All of the music you heard in this episode was produced by me in Chicago, Illinois.

Special thanks to Peter Bufano and Joy Powers for their help with this series.

For more information about Elliana, and the people, places, and things you heard about on this episode, check the show notes at circustalk.com/news.

I'm Book Kennison. I'll see you down the road.