

See you down the road: Episode 4: Julie Jenkins

Book Kennison: This is the Circus Voices podcast, from circustalk.com. I'm Book Kennison. It's April 2nd, as I make this recording, and that feels significant, since every day is both completely unprecedented and exactly like the day before. That's just to say it's hard to know where we'll be on April 6th, when this episode is due to be released, but our hope is that all of us will be doing a little bit better than we are today.

Anyway, our guest for this episode is Julie Jenkins. She's one of the founders of Midnight Circus here in Chicago. Full disclosure—I work for Midnight Circus, as does Zoë, my co-producer. So, the Jenkins family and I live in the same neighborhood, although we haven't seen each other in what already feels like a long time. Every year we finish our tour at our local park, right up the street, and I'm thinking about our circus, our little big top, and I'm hoping we can get back there—cast, audience, everyone packed in tight, ready for another show.

Let's get to the episode. Zoë recorded this intro before we went into isolation, and it was a good take, so I didn't want it to go to waste. Here we go:

Zoë Kennison: You're listening to *see u down the road*. True circus stories, told by the artists who lived them. I'm Zoë Kennison. On today's episode: Julie Jenkins. Julie is an actor and director from Chicago, Illinois. She and her husband, Jeff, are the founders of Midnight Circus and its long-running *Circus in the Parks* program in Chicago. In this episode, Julie opens up about becoming a mother, retaining her identity as an artist, and how her two children, Max and Sam, have been raised by their circus community. Here's Julie Jenkins.

Julie Jenkins: In the early 2000s we were the artistic directors of Circus Smirkus, an all-youth touring circus company based in Vermont, and we were also the founders and creators and artistic directors of a company here in Chicago that we created in the 90s, called Midnight Circus.

We were on tour with Smirkus, and I kept falling asleep. I would say, *hey, that was a great show, let's get the troupers to their homestays and let's celebrate*. And no sooner did everyone get their tour duties done, and I'd be sitting there, and I'd open up my drink and I'd fall asleep. I mean I could not stay awake on that tour. I think there's a bunch of pictures of me in black fishnets sleeping backstage.

And I got back to Chicago and found out I was pregnant. I worked in the air, over granite—seemingly I was like, I can do this, this isn't going to change anything. We're just gonna have a baby, but life will still be the same. And then in 2005 our first child Max was born, and he was born in May, and we usually would go out to Vermont to start pre-production mid-May. And I had ended up having an emergency C-section, and I was like woah, this is like—there's a living person depending on me. And so I sent Jeff along with the dogs to Vermont, and he took off, drove there by himself with the dogs and I was left with this newborn baby.

Very quickly I made the decision—I think he was four weeks old—that *no no no*, I need to go to Vermont, I need to go to Circus Smirkus, because I just—I already felt like wow, who am I now? What am I going to do, I have this baby, this is going to change everything now that the baby's here. And so probably the most powerful thing I did was book the plane ticket and hop on a

plane with a four-week-old newborn. I knew if I could just get to Vermont, somebody would be there to pick me up and take me to the Circus Barn, and everything would be fine—and it was. That was really an important step in us still being able to consider ourselves viable artists.

And then Hurricane Katrina happened later that year, and I looked at Jeff and I said, *we need to shut down the circus. We need to stop doing this; we have nothing to do to help people, let's run away from the circus and join a real life. Maybe I'll go to nursing school, and I don't know what you're going to do, but you're going to do something too, and we're going to be helpers in the world, we're not just going to be artists.*

That was the path we were on, until we overheard at our local park that they were going to shut down our playground, because it was run down and they didn't have the money to rebuild it. So I came home from the playground and I went to Jeff and said, *OK, we're going to shut down the circus, but first we're going to do one weekend of shows.*

We went from being a for-profit company, performing in theaters and corporate events, to a non-profit arts organization, and all that entails. So in some ways, becoming a mom that first time, it's the only reason we're still producing, and producing the way we're doing.

Then I got pregnant again. [Laughs]. I don't know how that happened.

The last thing we wanted to do was to put our kids in the circus ring, because who—what circus performer in their right mind, what actor in their right mind, what musician in their right mind would actually want your children to follow in your footsteps, because you know eventually they're going to face rejection, and eventually they're going to face financial uncertainty, and it's just—they're going to have a really rich life in experiences, but they're going to pay for it. They're going to pay for that.

Oh man, I'm remembering that actually Max's debut in the ring was much earlier. Again, you make due. We were on tour with Circus Smirkus. Jeff was performing with our dog, Lola; they had this great act—actually we all three had a great act, and it would finish with a three-high—Jeff on the base, and I would be on Jeff's shoulders, and then Lola would run up to my shoulders, and it was amazing. Lola was so good. Jeff wanted to perform that act; we were on tour with Circus Smirkus, and Lola was there, and we should perform it—and I had this newborn.

Jeff would pull me out of the audience, and he would bring—no, first he would bring the baby out of the audience, and people were horrified. And he'd bring the newborn baby up to the pitbull, and he would just hold the baby in front of the pitbull, and of course the pitbull would lick this baby's face, because it was its person, right, this newborn baby—Lola thought Max was her baby, too. And then he would hand the baby to one of the clowns, assisting; and I would be this horrified mom, and I would come out to get my baby and then Jeff would put me on his shoulders, and then Lola would run to the top of my shoulders, and then we would take a family bow, the four of us.

Yeah, that was a really special time. There's been so many of those special moments that I'm grateful for, that have made not just being a circus producer/director/performer special—I think it's made my kids' childhoods really special.

We used the circus as a parenting technique—we were with our kids, we would say, especially in those early years—*you can't be in the circus unless you can do something, so if you want to do something you have to work hard at it, and you have to practice and then you can be in the show*. We got the chance to have these incredibly cool artists from all over model good behavior for our children, and they shared their knowledge and skills in-the-ring and out-of-the-ring with our kids. They saw people practice, and they saw what it took, and they respected it, and you could tell they wanted to be a part of it. And provided they were willing to learn, the artists were willing to share with them. So that's a gift; that's been a huge gift.

So Max has gone on to do other kinds of performing too; he's gone on to do some film and television and people will say to him, on sets, they will remark—*wow, you have the most amazing work ethic for someone so young*. And he will always respond with, *I mean, I'm not working hard here, nothing is harder than the circus*.

And so we were doing Midnight Circus in the parks, we were growing that program, but I had stopped performing altogether really, and I had also felt like I had lost a lot of my identity, because so much of my identity is tied to being a performer. And that went on for about three years, where I just sort of, kind of dabbled in performance, but I didn't think I could perform in the same way.

It became clear that this program that we were doing needed to grow and we needed a circus tent. I got very inspired to work again, and started training again. The first summer we got the tent, 2011, Jeff and I performed our two-person comedy-acrobatic-knockabout routine. And I think, having been through all this life, I think it was funniest it's ever been—maybe the skills weren't as quiet as sharp, but they came back, we were training hard. And so we got to perform as circus performers in our tent that first year, and then we hung up our acrobatic ways, and just became directors and producers.

We've been really great at creating community, and creating a company where people feel ownership of the experience, and they feel part of the family because they are part of the family. And where we're not very strong is in our business sense, in terms of—you know business people would meet with us along the way and say, *what's your three-year plan, what's your five-year plan?* When you're writing grants, you have to say *oh, this is our three-year plan, this is our five-year plan*, and this is just not a way we ever used to think.

So when I think about what my goals are, in motherhood, in circus, in the evolution of the company, I have this idea that eventually my family—the Jenkins family—will not be there; we can't, it's not sustainable. But then other families, other family members would step up, and it would be okay for our very loyal audiences, because they would still be invested, and there's still the familial bond amongst the performers. I like the idea of, at some point, other performers will bring their families in, and *that* family will become the nucleus, and their kids will benefit from living this really beautiful life—and then I hope someday my kids come back and know that this is our home.

After I had one kid, Max—*psh*, I was still young, so I was like *oh, I'm an artist*, and that was part of taking that journey to Vermont for me I was like, *what is my identity now?* And it was like, wait a second, I decided to have children because I wanted to share my life with them, I didn't want to give up my life. That was very much the case when it was just three of us and our dogs, was I still felt very much like an artist—who also had a kid. And that became more challenging with the second. I was also a little older.

There is something I'm very aware of, as a woman—as a middle-aged woman—you start to feel invisible, you start to feel like you're not being seen anymore. I think that's been the challenge of my generation—we're not accepting that it's time for us to, you know, disappear. We're sandwiched between being the children of our aging parents and parents of our children who are growing up, and that is a very confusing and painful time in life, I think. And I also think that, in the most painful times in my life, some of the best stuff has been created...so I'm just trying to breathe through it all.

Hi Book. So, I have taken a long time to do this, because I mostly start recording my thoughts and I burst into tears. So, my family has been sheltering in, and we're really lucky, because we have a circus in our garage; it's where we rehearse *Midnight Circus*, so that space is filled with a lot of energy and hope; it's filled with a lot of promise for the future, and...gosh I'm getting a little emotional, it's been a stressful time for me...when I look back, when we did this interview several months ago, I talked on the podcast about being in the “sandwich generation,” and I find that's really relevant to my experience with Covid-19 now. I have parents that are in their late 80s, and they're not in town, so I can't see them. My father is a practicing physician, still, at 86, and is going to work, and my mom is home—it's really isolating for them, and I find a lot of my energy goes towards worrying about—are they going to stay safe, am I going to see them again, really.

And I'm also worried about my children, and keeping them whole and happy. I'm recognizing this is an event that will define their generation. These are defining moments, and this is a big one, so I'm just trying to keep them calm and productive and still growing as human beings.

Obviously the whole world is on hold, and, understandably, people's priorities are in surviving. Everyone's taking a hit, and the circus is no different. The status of our tour in 2020 is promising, given its timing, but it's certainly uncertain. I mean nothing is certain. *Midnight Circus* in the parks has always been about more about entertainment, it's been about creating community. You know, we've always given away much more than we've taken in. I think there's going to be a shift, and I think organizations such as ours are going to be essential.

That said, it's a challenge for so many, and I'm trying to remain in a place of gratitude, being that I'm sheltering in with people that I really love. So I'm trying to keep my kids growing, and evolving, and becoming better humans, and helping them try to process what's happening—and it's hard to help your children process it when you find that you can't really process it either. I think in the future, artists will be more important than ever. Artists naturally choose to let hope in, so I'm hoping that together we'll all get through it and emerge with a different set of priorities—for our country, and the world—I'm hopeful that we all emerge safely and that the path forward is actually brighter than it was before this.

Book: Thanks to Julie Jenkins for talking to us. For more about Julie and Midnight Circus, check the show notes at circustalk.com/news.

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All of the music you heard in this episode was produced by me, right here in isolation.

CircusTalk is committed to helping artists in this time of crisis. On their site, they've started a Covid-19 page with resources for artists, up-to-date circus cancellations and postponements, and information about health in your region. They're also offering two free months of the PRO feature to all members. To get full access to employment, audition and residency information, use the promo code COVID19 (with no hyphen) to access the pro membership for free.

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