

## Suitcase Circus SCREAM Mobility Project Paula McKaskill Testimony

When NICA staff were given the chance to apply for an exchange with the National Centre for Circus Arts in London, I was very excited! It is not every day that you get the opportunity to meet and work with other co-ordinators who deal with operations similar to the NICA Short Course program. Last year I was thrilled to meet Beth King, Head of Participation and Outreach from the NCCA when she came to Melbourne, because she not only runs a similar program but does so on a much larger scale. My plan was to spend time with Beth and other key staff to see how they managed their administration of such a large number of clients as well as looking at their progressions for young people into their higher education programs.

My name is Paula McKaskill and I am the Short Course Co-ordinator here at the National Institute of Circus Arts in Melbourne, Australia. Through the Short Course office we arrange workshops, birthday parties and events, private tuition, the Open Training Program and circus classes for children, teenagers and adults. All activities that we operate fit in around the higher education programs.

It was great to arrive in London after a long flight (although the drop in temperature was a bit of a shock!), locate my lodgings and scout the area. The NCCA was only about a 5 minute walk from my apartment which was great. I arrived on Saturday and set out on foot on Sunday morning to visit the London Bridge, Tower of London, Notting Hill, Portabello Road and Big Ben. What fun!

It was off to the circus on Monday with a tour of their beautiful facilities followed by a meeting with Beth and her team to discuss their roles and responsibilities and to get an overview of their programmes. They run programmes 7 days a week and there is great demand for places into their classes. They have a level system for students to progress through, with trainers signing off when students are ready to progress to the next level. We were able to discuss the processes in place to assess students each term and the administration required to communicate with and enrol each student.

One of the key motivators for me visiting the NCCA was to see their youth programs in action. The London Youth Circus is a progressive training programme for 11-21 year olds who are interested in entering circus, gymnastics or performing arts as a profession. I liked the idea that once young people are accepted into the program they have the opportunity to train for between 3.5-7.5 hours a week on their specialties as well as take extra fitness classes to complement their training. I will be reflecting on everything I saw to see how I can develop better pathways here at NICA for young people to develop skills and be prepared for the higher education programs if that is the direction they choose to go in.

I also spent time with Glen Stewart, Director of Training, talking about our circus trainers and the difficulty of training them and keeping them, especially when they are also performing circus artists. Glen was very generous with sharing his ideas and resources and I really enjoyed our chats. I think we agreed that we both experience the same issues in regards to training and retaining staff and it doesn't matter where in the world your classes are running!

It was great to meet with Carl (customer service), Cathy (marketing) and Alice (ACDC) at the NCCA to learn more about their systems and services. Their staff structure for each department was notable and each arm of the business seems to have considerable leadership staff and administrative assistance which in turn supports their high quality customer communications and services. I was most interested in their customer management system as we are currently looking at new options for NICA.

During my stay I travelled to Bristol to visit Circomedia (Centre for Contemporary Circus and Physical Theatre) and also to Jacksons Lane in Highgate which is a multi-arts venue and supporter of new emerging circus artists. Each venue gave me further insight into the popularity of circus in the UK culture and allowed me to get a better understanding of the different pathways young people can take to becoming circus artists and performers.

Thank you to the Erasmus+ Project for this amazing opportunity to travel to the United Kingdom and witness first-hand the operations of another national circus school. From this experience I have returned home with so much information which I will refer to as I plan changes in my own programs as well as sharing this information with other areas of our organisation. I would totally recommend the Erasmus+ Project to others if they get the opportunity.

Thank you also to all of the wonderful people that shared their time and expertise with me during my visit. If you are ever in Melbourne I would love to return your hospitality and show you around NICA!