

Debby Maziarz, circus manager, Melbourne

The unlikable kid

Diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactive disorder at the age of two, Debby spent her childhood and teenage years in therapy and in trouble.

Having failed at tennis and guitar, Debby found her 'place' when she joined the Women's Circus at the age of 17. Being one of the youngest of over 60 female members, Debby was supported and encouraged to flex her artistic muscle and exercise her creative talents.

In the Women's Circus Debby tackled unicycle, then group bike (she was the base), then ropes and then a solo web routine.

In 1992 she participated in a director's mentorship program which involved tuition and skill share with 10 leading female directors including Robyn Archer, Robin Laurie and Meme McDonald.

Debby directed her first theatre piece 'the finale' in the Women's Circus 1993 large-scale Amnesty International Show. Debby remained an active training member and performer in the Women's Circus until 2003.

Debby joined the Women's Circus as a troubled, disparaged and unconfident teenager. She left a self-assured, confident and determined young woman.

The juggling youth worker

The Westside Circus was founded in 1995, when Debby Maziarz (then youth worker) received a grant from the Department of Justice to purchase stilts and juggling balls and deliver a circus program for young female offenders at the Sunshine Juvenile Justice Unit. The program was hugely successful and Debby was invited to teach circus skills to young women at the Niddrie Secondary College, the University High School and the Don Bosco Youth Centre in Collingwood.

As a part-time youth worker with the Moonee Valley City Council, Debby coordinated a range of young women's groups and used circus and drama as an effective engagement tool.

She implemented a circus exchange program for young people who lived on the North Melbourne Housing Estate, teaching stilt-walking once a month on a Wednesday night.

The classes were free and in exchange the young people would make juggling balls, repair the stilts and assist with teaching in schools and at festivals.

Debby was working as a part-time circus teacher at St Joseph's College and a casual Youth Worker for the Moonee Valley City Council, when in 1997 she formally launched the Westside Circus, a circus and performance program for local young women.

Through a Moonee Valley Community Grant and an equipment grant from the QUIT Campaign, Debby established a circus space first at the Flemington Community Centre and then a year later at the North Melbourne Community Centre.

Weekly circus and performance classes were offered to young women for \$3. Those who couldn't pay would coordinate mail outs and assist with teaching.

In December 1997 the Westside Circus produced its first large-scale performance 'Fazed Out' where 25 five young women and a live band performed over three nights to an audience of 700 people.

The business decision

By 2002 the Westside Circus had grown into a reputable and popular community arts program for young people aged 12-25 years.

More than 100 local young people participated in circus workshops each year. Circus trainers were recruited internally from the program's long-term participant base.

Large-scale performances were presented annually in the Next Wave and Fringe Festivals with extensive invitations to perform at youth festivals and events across Melbourne.

Still a part-time youth worker, Debby now spent up to two days each week training the circus trainers, responding to workshop and performance enquiries, teaching circus workshops, producing marketing materials and fundraising.

She had nurtured a pool of five circus trainers who were previous program participants and she was managing up to three youth volunteers.

With the growing demand for programs, the building momentum of success and the desire to inspire and support more young people to reach their full potential, Debby decided to leave the safe bosom of local government, quit her part-time youth worker job and create an independent identity for the Westside Circus.

Debby spent the following year researching business models, interviewing CEOs, company founders and building organisation capacity skills.

She approached Leadership Victoria and secured an interim board of management made up of six senior executives who assisted Debby with developing a one-page mission statement. Armed with this key business tool Debby secured business mentors, funding, ongoing board members and new government and philanthropic partners.

In 2002 she received a Queens Trust Achiever Award and a \$10,000 professional development grant to complete a three-month youth circus residency project in Barcelona Spain.

In 2003 the Westside Circus became incorporated as a not-for-profit community arts organisation with deductible gift and charity status.

A full time marketing and administration co-ordinator was employed (Steph Urruty) and a small office was established at the Arts House in South Melbourne. In 2004 the Westside Circus moved into its current Fitzroy venue.

The outcome

Today the Westside Circus is one of the most successful new community arts initiatives in Melbourne.

With an annual turnover of \$950,000 and up to 80 circus projects on the go each year, the Westside Circus uses innovation and entrepreneurship to deliver a statewide program that has a positive social impact on the most disadvantaged and at-risk members of the community.

Westside Circus Programs reach 400 local families each week and 8000 community participants Victoria-wide each year.

Since establishing the Westside Circus in 1995 a growing team of managers and artists have managed rapid organisation growth with turnover increasing from \$211,330 in 2003 to \$950,000 in 2010.

The Westside Circus 'product' is developed and implemented using fundamental community cultural development practices. Classes are inclusive and fun. Circus trainers are caring and skilled. Community partners are valued. Community needs and nuances are celebrated. In the past the Westside Circus has collaborated artistically with The Melbourne Show Grounds, Parks Victoria, Delfin Land Authority, the Australian Asparagus Council and Restaurant Fifteen.

Debby and her colleagues have been able to successfully sell 'circus' as the solution to obesity and poor literacy and as a preventative measure to crime, poor mental health and social disconnection.

The Westside Circus is famous for designing and delivering innovative circus programs in a range of professional and community contexts.

The Westside Circus team has successfully inspired a community where people want to make things happen and be their very best.

The next chapter

In June 2010 Debby made the hardest decision of her life to date. She decided after 15 years of service (blood, sweat and tears), that it was time for her to leave the Westside Circus and allow the organisation to grow in new and different ways. It was also time for a new adventure. She resigned as the Executive Director of the Westside Circus in June 2010, leaving behind a strong vision and philosophy, a passionate staff team, a sturdy board of management, a healthy capital reserve and a clear strategic direction. Debby dreamed of harnessing her creative drive, love of circus and compassion for others to create the ideal job for herself and she made that dream a reality. She left feeling proud, humbled and satisfied.

Since leaving the Westside Circus Debby has spent time with her family and has delivered inspirational speeches in schools. She has recently joined Polyglot Theatre as a part-time business manager and she is also assisting Firefoxes Australia with strategic planning and fundraising.

So although, once again busy as a bee, Debby is a women in transition. She is butterfly-netting ideas of how she can best use her energy, passion and leadership. Although she hasn't quite found the next big thing, she does know that her higher purpose is to help others and lead passionately in the area of social change.