

# The Oregonian

## Three-ring family

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The Oregonian

When James Judkins cashed in his stocks a few years ago and bought a traveling circus, he knew exactly what he was getting into.

As a young college student 20 years ago, Judkins, who was born in New Hampshire, had taken a summer job as a cook for the Carson & Barnes circus.

He was just trying to put himself through school, but two weeks later he learned how to eat fire and started to perform.

He never went back to college, choosing instead a life on the road. Fire eating, the bed of nails, the needle through the arm, and an elephant show were his main acts.

In 1997, Judkins, who had by then become a circus manager, decided to cash in his stocks and start his own show. His Circus Chimera, an old-fashioned traveling circus, performs at the Clackamas Town Center this week.

Judkins' troupe is a mix of self-trained talents and performing arts stars. Performers hail from Russia, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela -- places where performing in a circus is often passed from generation to generation, where the circus is the family.

"I used to have a dog, but I didn't have time to devote to it," Judkins said. "My mother traveled with me until she was older. My sister also came along until she got married. You can't do this work if you have outside responsibilities.

"The circus consumes you. It's your family; it's your whole life 24/7."

This circus family is multilingual, multigenerational and toughened by a gypsy lifestyle. There is Ekaterina Bazarova, the 19-year-old Russian contortionist and Twister world champion, who can bend her body any way she likes.

Both her parents were in a circus, and Bazarova traveled the world with them. She was home-schooled and started performing when she was 11, eventually training to be an Olympic gymnast and joining the Budapest Circus.

Now, Bazarova, a petite blonde, shares a tiny trailer with her boyfriend, Vasily Makarenko, 26, a former bodyguard to a Russian businessman. Makarenko, who never wanted to join a circus and came to the United States seven months ago to be with Bazarova, is learning to juggle. Bazarova's parents work in a Las Vegas circus.

"She's so perfect. I just tell her how to do something and she does it," exclaims Bazarova's choreographer Victor Ivaschenko, a well-built man from Kyrgyzstan, as the young contortionist challenges him to a quick game of Twister, then lugs bags of laundry to a nearby Laundromat.

Ivaschenko leads the way into the 60-foot tent, where the Chimal brothers are lifting weights in preparation for Monday night's performance. He gets a hug and a greeting in Russian from Walter "Pachiro" Chimal, 28, who hails from Mexico and whose family makes up about half the troupe.

The Chimals have been in the circus business for three generations. Walter Chimal's grandfather ran away from home at age 10 to join the circus. Chimal's grandfather, now in his 60s, still performs as a clown in Mexico.

Walter Chimal, also known as the "Serpentine Sultan of Straps," dangles from thin strips of cloth with his cousins Saul and Miguel. Walter's parents, six brothers, two sisters-in-law, two cousins, and 2-year-old nephew all perform for Circus Chimera.

"We were born and raised in a circus," Walter Chimal said. "It's something that's in our blood and it's a little hard to get rid of it."

Chimal said his family is like any other family, but its members live constantly on the road, in the close, cramped quarters of multiple trailers. After a show, Chimal and his brothers like to go to movies or for a drink.

But not all families make it. Agostino Provenzano's parents divorced, because his father, who worked for a petroleum company in Venezuela, couldn't get used to circus life, and his mother, a circus performer, did not want to settle down.

Provenzano, 22, chose circus life over his parents' wishes. His parents kept him in school until he was 21. He now performs with his uncles on the trapeze and on the Wheel of Destiny.

"I love this life, the adrenaline of performance, and the response of the audience," he said in Spanish. "I wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world."

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