

None of us are normal

(AND NEITHER ARE YOU)

My friend Jenn Breman is one of those people who are so extremely hip that it's actually annoying. She can name every obscure band you've never heard of and every author that's written anything worth reading. She's a photographer who hates to have her picture taken, a loquacious, articulate type who hates to be interviewed. And while she is impressive, she is nearly impossible to impress - all qualities you wouldn't think would be endearing, but are.

Earlier this month, the two of us were hanging out on the roof of her Fifth St. walk-up drinking wine and smoking cigarettes while a party inside was winding up with raucous laughter spilling from the windows. Jenn and I were talking about the upcoming benefit show for The Circus Artist Collective that she has helped organize. She didn't have any prior experience organizing an event like this, and I asked her if she was nervous.

"I don't have butterflies," she said. "I have bats."

A few months ago, Jenn was actually on her way out of Dayton, but then The Circus came to town, and she nixed her plans. For her, this group of likeminded artists committed to promoting community, personal empowerment, and creative expression was reason enough to stay.

"I think this is going to be the way the Dayton doesn't break my heart anymore," she told me. "It's like having a really terrible boyfriend. He has such potential, and he's so wonderful, and sometimes he makes you really happy, but then he breaks your heart, and you have to leave."

Then she laughed.

"But you always come back again."

When the doors of the Pearl open at 9:30 pm on April 5, the public will see for the first time what The Circus is about. On display that night will be a combination of 2D art, performance art, musical performances, and of course, cupcakes. The proceeds will go toward the various projects the collective is pursuing, the most ambitious of which is the purchase of a downtown building to be used as a headquarters, venue, and collective workspace among other items.

The Circus Collective aims not only to promote local artists, but to provide Dayton with a gathering space, and encourage the cross-pollination of ideas - all lofty goals, to be sure, but artists aren't known for dreaming small.

At present, the collective is made up of roughly 20 members, though there are about 30 who are actively working with the group. The organization is in its early stages, and is so far characterized by the kind of idealism you find among Peace Corps volunteers. The group involves people unhindered by

such practical realities as a lack of capital, limited skill sets, or an inexperienced staff.

Their philosophy seems to be: No money? Raise it. Don't know how to do it? Learn. Not enough manpower? Make friends.

It may be simplistic, but so far it's working.

Now, before we go any further, and in the interest of full disclosure, I should note here that I am a member of The Circus, but this is no press release.

This is the story of how The Circus came to Dayton.

It all began with The Sideshow and, therefore, The Sideshow's organizer, Laurana Wong. The Circus was her idea.

Opening last June, The Sideshow was less an art event than a night of organized chaos. The event included art of all sorts: live music, performance art, 2D art, and interactive installations - as well as a free bar, and many snacks of varying degrees of yumminess. Two months in the making, the show involved the efforts of 45 artists, some of whom had never shown their work before and some of whom were veterans of the blossoming Dayton art scene.

I first met Laurana in the huge space in the Cannery where the show was held. A week before the show opened, she was stressed out and exhausted. Her stable of artists had grown, but none were being paid for their efforts and none of the artwork featured in the show would be up for sale. She was struggling with how to inspire them.

Her blue jeans were heavily scuffed at the knees and her sandaled feet charcoaled with the same black dust that covered the 8,000 square feet of splintered hardwood floor. A thick pencil stuck from the back pocket, and her glasses hung from a belt loop. All around us were tools, extension cords, folding chairs, paint cans. For the previous month and a half, this had been her life.

"This is my baby," she said. "I've been telling everyone that I'm pregnant with the Sideshow, but I'm feeling jaded today. I don't feel loving, and I'm a loving person, you know?"

A graduate of the University of Tennessee, where she earned a degree in electrical engineering, Laurana had recently quit her \$75,000 a year job with Jacobs Sverdrup, the technology division of Jacobs Engineering Inc, and reinvented herself as what she called a "life artist."

"It was the show," she explained. "I felt it coming on, but I didn't realize how soon I would be quitting. I was just sitting in the lab one day for four hours, staring at the screen. I didn't feel like doing anything. That's when I knew that I needed to leave."

Observing the collection of local artists as they milled around the space, talking or smoking cigarettes on the sidewalk outside, there seemed less a sense of urgency about what they

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