

# “SAFETY FROM WITHIN”

## AN INVESTIGATION INTO *LIFELINE*

### A FUNAMBULISM PROJECT BY GALWAY COMMUNITY CIRCUS, JULY 2022

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*Independent*

Les personnes participant à des programmes de formation de cirque semblent être guidées par une émotion qui n'est pas directement liée à l'envie ou au désir. Elles ne semblent pas non plus vouloir éviter un sentiment de dégoût ou de peur, bien au contraire le plus souvent. Elles apparaissent davantage motivées par toute une mosaïque d'émotions autour des notions d'identification, de confiance et de tissage des liens. En d'autres termes, les participant-es sont porté-es par un véritable esprit de communauté. Cet article tente de démontrer que les techniques et les styles d'enseignement spécifiques aux arts du cirque pour un public jeune (par exemple, donner une place à chacun-e, n'exclure personne, montrer que tout est possible, apprendre à s'adapter), ainsi que l'approche adoptée pour former les animateurs et animatrices (par exemple, mettre l'accent sur le savoir-être et le savoir-faire) sont des aspects fondamentaux pour favoriser le développement de cet esprit de groupe. L'événement *Lifeline* illustre parfaitement la mise en pratique de ces techniques et de ces approches. Dans le cadre du Galway International Arts Festival, ce spectacle de funambulisme, organisé en juillet 2022 par le Galway Community Circus, a réuni 140 artistes sur plusieurs fils tendus au-dessus du fleuve Corrib. En s'appuyant sur les propos recueillis lors d'entretiens avec les personnes chargées de l'organisation et les participant-es, cet article vise à montrer qu'en donnant aux participant-es un espace pour s'identifier librement, favoriser ainsi largement la confiance et la faire évoluer vers une relation élève-professeur-e harmonieuse, 140 personnes ont pu traverser un plan d'eau sur un fil devant un public nombreux.

**Mots clés:** cirque, cirque social, communauté, confiance, funambulisme, performance, projet participatif international, Galway, Irlande, Irlandais-e

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Participants in circus training programmes appear to exhibit a motivating emotion that does not correlate directly with wanting or desire, nor does their motivation appear to be derived from the avoidance of disgust or fear. The opposite is quite often true. Instead, the motivating emotion that participants appear to exhibit seems to be a product, or combination, of identification, trust, and bonding. Put simply, we may describe this motivating emotion as a particular sense of community. This paper will attempt to show that the particular training techniques and styles used in youth circus (e.g. a place for everyone, no one is excluded, anything is possible, adaptability) and the approach to trainer training (e.g. having an emphasis on soft skills as well as hard techniques) are fundamental in allowing for this particular sense of community to develop and thrive. 2022's Lifeline performance is a particularly good example of these techniques and approaches. Lifeline was a funambulism spectacle organised by Galway Community Circus in July 2022, where 140 performers crossed the River Corrib on a series of highwires as part of the Galway International Arts Festival. Based on interviews with the organisers and participants, this paper will attempt to show that giving the participants a space for free identification, nurturing a healthy level of trust, and developing that trust into an appropriate tutor-student bond enabled 140 people to tight-rope walk across a river in Galway in front of thousands of people.

**Keywords:** circus, social circus, community, trust, funambulism, performance, international participatory project, Galway, Ireland, Irish

OVER the years, I have been fortunate enough to be involved with a variety of circus projects, performances and festivals; some big, some small, but all of them with a little bit of magic. However, nothing prepared me for the spectacle of *Lifeline*. The video associated with this text captures some of the colour, vibrancy and power of the performance; it shows the *what* of *Lifeline*. The interviews with the participants and organizers reveal more of the *how*. This text will delve deeper into the *why* of *Lifeline*. For me, the *why* of it all started with watching the performers cross the river to warm rounds of applause and seeing each crossing finish with cheers and hugs, which led me to wonder, "What motivates someone to step out onto a wire and walk across a river?"

As can be seen in the accompanying video, "*Lifeline: A funambulism spectacle organized by Galway Community Circus*," the performers were motivated by their national and international partners and an army of volunteers. On Saturday, 16 July 2022, 140 performers crossed the Claddagh Basin on a series of highwires.

*Lifeline's* performers came from a broad cross-section of backgrounds. They ranged in age from ten to 66 years old, and while some were professional circus artists, many were beginners and novices whose only circus experience had been the preparation for this feat. The event was part of the Galway International Arts Festival and took place on an unusually bright and sunny day.

The rainbow colours of the performers' costumes shone as they crossed the dark water. An enormous audience filled the banks of the Claddagh and cheered as each participant crossed the wire. The question of *why*—why someone would intentionally and willingly cross a treacherous river on a wire in front of thousands of people—is a question worth dedicating some time to answering.

*Lifeline* was an international participatory project that promoted physical and mental well-being, safe risk-taking and social inclusion through funambulism—tightwire walking using a balancing pole. The project was produced and presented by Galway Community Circus and a host of other funders, partners and contributors.<sup>1</sup>

*Lifeline* was a spectacular performance—Europe's largest highwire performance event—that saw 140 performers cross over the River Corrib on a series of seven high wires. The site of the performance, the River Corrib in Galway City, has been described as a suicide hotspot. The rushing water, the closeness of the river to Galway Bay and its vicinity to the centre of the city meant that over the years, many people, especially younger people, died at this location by suicide (Keating).

In our interview for this article, Ulla Hokkanen, Director of Galway Community Circus and Artistic Director of *Lifeline*, explained that one of the primary goals of the project was “to use the art of funambulism to create a spectacle performance over the river that would give people hope, that would build resilience and [would allow] people here in Galway to look at that site in a different light.” Hokkanen elaborated on the thought process that led up to *Lifeline* in an interview for *The Irish Times* newspaper:

It seemed very bad in 2016 [...] I was living beside it, and it was constant. Every week there was another death. You would hear the helicopters, and everyone who lives in Galway knows what that means: that someone has jumped into the river and the helicopters are looking for them [...] we thought about this idea of trying to address youth mental health and wellbeing through circus. We are not trained mental-health experts, but with community projects, like circus, we can help create a preventive space, a safe space, for young people to overcome challenges and support themselves and each other. (Keating)

Funambulism was selected as the ideal circus art to achieve *Lifeline*'s objectives, as from an objective or aesthetic perspective, it provided an opportunity to redefine the landscape of the city by framing the Corrib in a different light. In this way, the metaphor was the event, and the event was the metaphor.

When asked about their feelings toward the River Corrib's rushing waters in an interview, participants spoke of fear, anxiety and dread. Specifically, multiple

participants mentioned the dark feelings that took them when they heard the helicopters at night, a sign that another person had gone into the water.

So, the organizers choosing to utilize a circus art that specifically conjures up these darker feelings by asking performers to place themselves in the apparent jeopardy of falling into the water created an event of catharsis for the community.<sup>2</sup> Through their enjoyment of the spectacle and their wonder at the performers’ abilities, the thousands of Galwegians and arts festival attendees who watched the funambulists perform could purge the dark feelings connected to the river. Funambulism was, in this way, the perfect medium to achieve the organizers’ goals.

Elsewhere, the multidimensional nature of circus art has been shown to allow for a very wide variety of people to participate.<sup>3</sup> *Lifeline* set out to show that funambulism could exemplify that same multidimensionality. It was decided that performers would be able to choose the length and height of the wire they walked, and that they would also be able to choose figures with different degrees of difficulty, from a simple step-by-step to sitting or lying on the wire.

But if the project was to allow for beginners, professionals and everyone in between to cross the river, then a new training programme would be needed. Becca Clayton, the Producer of *Lifeline*, highlighted this in our interview:

So traditionally, before this point, [funambulism was] a solo activity passed down through the generations. To do this project, we had to find a way of being able to teach it to people who weren’t experts before; people who have all kinds of different ages and backgrounds.

With their partners in the *École de cirque de Bruxelles* and other organizations such as Circus Factory Cork, Cloughjordan Circus Club and Dublin Circus Project, they developed a methodology that would first train trainers and tutors, then train participants from around Ireland and across Europe to reach a degree of skill where they could perform as part of *Lifeline*. Clayton explains that throughout this process, there was “a focus on improving well-being and mindfulness.” In this way, aside from being Europe’s largest high-wire spectacle (Keating), *Lifeline* could also be described as one of the world’s largest social circus projects.

The video we made of *Lifeline* captures the fun and vivacity of the event, but the social and communal impacts of the project aren’t as easily captured visually. The following section will delve further into the project’s social and community impacts and, in doing so, briefly step away from the audiovisuals.

*Lifeline* can be considered a prime example of a social circus project in a number of ways, including the application of circus arts within a caring, supportive environment and the pedagogy employed, which focused on the development of trust between participants in a community-building setting.<sup>4</sup>

The term “Social Circus” refers to a form of non-commercial circus education and performance where the focus is on personal development, social inclusion and self-expression, as opposed to the achievement of a high level of artistic technique such as provided by professional circus schools. Essentially, social circus is the use of circus arts as a means rather than an end in itself.

One of the pioneers of the social circus movement, Dr. Reginald Bolton, is also a pioneer of circus studies. Bolton was both a practitioner and a theorist, and his work on both sides of the stage began in the early 1980s. What sets Bolton apart from many others is that he also documented and analyzed his practice, and then published those findings. He spent decades teaching younger people the basic techniques and skills of circus. Trust is one of the key skills he returns to repeatedly throughout his work.

Trust in oneself and others is a vital component of the personal, interpersonal and social skills that develop through the practice of social circus. Bolton argues that risk is an important experience in a young person’s life, and that youth and social circus provide people with strategies for taking risks in a safe and healthy environment. Circus practices and activities are centred on a certain element of risk, here defined as something distinct from danger or hazard:

[...] a toddler, learning to walk, must risk falling. She may fail many times, but her skill and therefore her chances will improve, and ultimately, she will succeed; she will win. Each attempt to stand is a gamble. If you want to avoid the risk of falling, simply remain sitting or lying down. (Bolton 30)

What is important about risk, and what should be drawn from the connection between risk and trust, is that the participants of social circus projects, including *Lifeline*, need to have a high degree of trust in the circus trainers and in their space before any risk, circus activity or catharsis can take place. Participants have to trust that the equipment is safe, that they will not be hurt when they fall, and that when they fall, they will not be ridiculed. They must trust that falling is normal, natural and expected. Clayton explains that the issue of trust was central to the entire project, from pedagogy to performance:

With the subject matter, addressing it in the right way, in a respectful way [...] we felt a lot of responsibility, I think, the whole time, wanting to make sure that everybody was physically safe and emotionally safe. And that we were going to give them a really fantastic experience that we knew we could give [...] and we very much felt the responsibility of what we were asking or encouraging other people to do.

This approach carried over into practice. The tutors who were trained in funambulism techniques were also given time to understand and appreciate the softer skills needed to wire-walk. Breathing systems, activities to focus thoughts, and a variety of games and playful techniques were employed to provide the performers with the mental space in which they could trust in themselves and the process and, in turn, achieve their personal objectives. Tony Mahon, *Lifeline's* Technical Manager, explains this in our interview:

Having been in charge of the whole setup and making sure everything is safe for them and manageable for them, it's a big relief to know that it was set up in a way that they could achieve their goal, and we could achieve our goal with them. I know they were doing a lot of work on mindfulness.

Beth Darragh was one of the performers interviewed for this article. As is the case for many of the performers, she had experience in aerial arts but not funambulism. She explained how the pedagogical approach set out by Hokkanen and Clayton and implemented by Mahon and the team of tutors impacted the effectiveness of the training:

I think if you're dealing with people that are so scared [...] it's a scary thing, you know. To go really high and just hope you don't fall is something that I think takes a lot of patience to teach. And they had so much patience, and they were so caring. They really made it such an amazing experience, for sure.

Another of the key aspects of the project's design was having tutors and experienced funambulists posted at the towers on either side of the wires. As can be seen from the video, this allowed performers with less experience to have someone help them onto the wire, as well as a person waiting for them at the end. In terms of physical safety, emotional safety and trust, this appears to have played an important role for the performers. Darragh explains this:

They were so helpful, and all of them just had this deep peace. They were so calm. Because when you're on the wire, you're so focused, but if you do get the wobble, for me anyway, I was panicking. You would look across and they'd be like, "breathe." And you'd be like, oh, yeah, just breathe! It's fine. I just need to breathe. And I think once you are reminded, and you do breathe, and you take a second, it's fun. You can do this. You've got this.

It appears that the approaches set out by the *Lifeline* team were effective in creating a safe space both physically and mentally, allowing trust to develop naturally

and supporting each performer as they strove to achieve their own goals. Mahon explains how this worked in practice from a tutor's perspective:

You have to have a keen eye for detail. [...] Everyone's different, of course. So you don't know what can happen, but you have to get used to what happens for those people in odd situations. If I feel like those little tweaks that they don't really like are too big, I'm not going to press ahead with encouraging them to do a big thing. But I'll reinforce the cleaning, the basics. [...] If it's not clean low, it's not gonna be clean high.

This in itself is noteworthy, as it reflects the multidimensionality of circus arts and exemplifies the social circus approach in a clear and measurable fashion. The measuring and analysis of this project would require more room than is possible here, but some interesting conclusions arise from this briefest of analyses of *Lifeline*.

It would appear that the care and time taken by the tutor team in their training for the event greatly impacted the effectiveness of the skills learned and the quality of the training experience. Darragh says:

You knew that they knew what they were doing, so you just trusted them to show you how to do it. And I think that's really important [...] you know, you can tell, and you can pick up on it. And these guys, they were amazing.

When Darragh says, "you can pick up on it," I would suggest that what is at work here is some form of identification through a form of modelling.

Seeing the tutors perform the act well gave the trainees confidence in the tutor's abilities, but seeing them perform in a calm way—and having that calm approach carry through to the bespoke learning outcomes and assessment for each trainee—meant that the trainees could also see themselves performing well and in a calm way. It could be said that they identified with or saw themselves in the tutors as calm and proficient funambulists, and they were then given the room to realize this. Mahon explains how this approach was intentional and explicit throughout the project:

So, it comes from the experience of the tutor in his own feelings [...] and then also recognizing certain patterns in people's behaviour; certain nervousness, certain psychologies, certain facets of how the mind reacts, and how that displays physically. There's a couple of tell-tale signs. You know, stress, tears, all of that sort of stuff as anxiety. And you don't want to push someone too far into there. All you can really do is say, "No, I believe you. The option is here, I think you will be fine. We can go

together." But you're not going to push. You're not going to put them in the uncomfortable zone, but you can make them aware; "I think the uncomfortable zone is safe for you at this time." And, again, that comes from experience, having been there yourself, and the observations that happened in the days before or even the hours before.

The trainees trusted the tutors and, in turn, trusted themselves, and I would argue that this could best be described as a moment of modelling—namely, an identification with the tutor. It could be argued that this act of identification is present in most, if not all, youth and social circus training. But identification is not generally thought of in terms of motivation. So, the question from the beginning still remains: What motivates someone to step out onto a wire and walk across a section of one of Europe's fastest-flowing rivers?

Based on the quote above, it appears that trust, and maybe some sort of identification, were involved in the performers' motivation. If we combine this idea with Bolton's understanding of the importance of risk within circus arts, we arrive at a position where a person who wishes to cross a river on a wire for their own personal reasons encounters circus arts tutors who show them how to do it safely, and that process promotes trust. The participants identify with the tutor, and through their shared appreciation of the importance of risk, they are able to find within themselves the physical and mental strength to achieve their goals. I like to think that through this experience of trust and the shared understanding and appreciation of the importance of risk, a new, and very particular, sense of community is built. This sense of community motivates people to trust in themselves and the organizers, to the point where they are comfortable while also feeling excited and possibly scared, but simultaneously motivated to cross a rushing river on a wire ("Feelings about Lifeline").

The word "community" is present in so many aspects of *Lifeline*. The video shows the Claddagh Basin lined with Galwegians watching, cheering and enjoying the performance. It seems appropriate to use this term to describe the motivating emotion of the performers in *Lifeline*, but what "community" exemplifies is also referred to by the performers when asked about their motivation. Darragh says:

I can't even put into words how amazing they were; so supportive. And they genuinely wanted people to succeed, so you really felt that energy when you were working with them. And everyone, even the other participants, was so supportive, and it sort of turned into a little family. And it's so rare—I mean, that's kind of common in circus, that people help each other out and build each other up to do the scary things. But I think maybe not so much from the general public, that you hear people being like "Go, Go! You can do this!" unless it's a sports game or something. So



it's really nice. You felt like everyone wanted you to succeed, and I think that that played into how well everyone did.

This sense of community was also central to the project from an organizational perspective; it was core to the intended outcomes for Galway Community Circus. Hokkanen explains *Lifeline's* intended outcomes:

One of the things that was really at the core of the project was showcasing the supportive community that the circus community is—showcasing the values of circus, which is about celebrating each individual's achievement, regardless of their level of experience or their background. So that's something we really wanted to make very obvious for the audience. And it was easy to make it very obvious, because it's so natural for the circus community. I think it's just part of the culture.

In an interview with *The Irish Times*, Hokkanen also spoke to how showcasing this particular sense of community within the *Lifeline* project may impact the broader Galway community:

Safety can come from within, and from within a community [the walkers become a] symbol for hope and resilience and overcoming challenges in life, with the support of community and the strength we have within. They will see the River Corrib in a different light, [see] that it is not just a place of negativity or tragedy, it can be a place of community and celebration, and art as well. (Keating)

Whether or not this sense of community is best for describing the motivating emotions of the funambulists in the *Lifeline* project will require further study and research. But for now, it should be clear that trust, identity, Bolton's concept of "risk" and a strong sense of community are exemplified in the strength and beauty of the performers within this cathartic spectacle.

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### *Interviewees:*

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### *Videographer:*

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*Lifeline performers:*

Aidan Phelan, Aileen Rogers, Alaa Abualrob, Alex Healy, Alex Lapouge, Alice Davis, Amelie Bal, Amine Addaji, Amy Heffernan, Anais Anouk, Andra Jurj, Anet A. Tesarové, Anna Fitzgerald, Anna Fogerty, Anne Timm, Anouk Baldin-Merer, Antonia O’Keele, Aodhfionn McCambridge-Geraghty, Aoibhe McHugh, Aoife R. A. Leigh, Apa Foltyn, Arlo Brauner, Axel Calvino, Baja Horové, Batsheva Battu, Beth Malone, Bethy Darragn, Bridget MacLochlainn, Bruno Frenette, Caoimhe O. Dochartaigh-Barr, Christina Kolitsa, Ciara Molougnney, Crisan Matei, Dario Buffa, Davi Hora, Davide Bertorello, Dominique Eckstein, Donncha Carew, Donnchadh Kennedy, Edaein Samuels, Emily Tracey, Emma S. Churlund, Evan McIntyre, Ewan Fox Powell, Freddy Burrows, Francesco Procopio, Gemy Abdou, Gill Byrne, Giselle C. Havannes, Giulio Cammarota, Glynis Hull-Rochelle, Hasti Yavari, Hendrike Brouwer, Ilja Eigenraam, Inés Garcia Montero, Iza Caraghiaur, Jachym Vacik, James King, Jeroen van Middendorp, Jessica Lane, Josh Byrne, Jude O’Neill, Kat McNobb, Klara Maria Zambach, Kyle Alexander, Laura Hogan, Laura Marco Gamundi, Leana Valentini, Leo Bal-Phelan, Lilly Davis, Lisa O’Farrell, Lucy Warmington, Mairead Dewar, Mara Copindean, Marie Asplund, Marine Blomart, Mata Ha Bartové, Matilda Muyingo, Max Lloya, Maxime Drouard, Merijn Adams, Mia Vos, Molly O’Brien, Moxy Mac Mathña, Muireann Ellison, Nanna Eriksen, Naomian Joyce, Nastja Fekonja, Natasha Bourke, Nikos Wolfl, Niv du Fournet, Omar Eltawie, Pete Bannigan, Raluca Secula, Ria Cororan, Roberto Polanco Araya, Sadbh Grehan, Sam Vanswevelt, Sana Addaji, Setanta Martin, Shannon Copland, Siofra Quinlivan, Spijker Loes, Stephen McGinley, Tony Manon, Vicky Lennie, Vidar Mazetti, Viki Antosovo, Vincent Wauters, Will Flanagan River, Andrea Loreni, Ellis Grover, Oliver Zimmerman

Full crew details are available here: [LifeLine-programme-People.pdf](#) ([galwaycommunitycircus.com](http://galwaycommunitycircus.com))

## Notes

1. Including Creative Europe, Erasmus+, Mental Health Ireland, Finnish Institute UK + Ireland, Galway City and County Councils, the European Centre of Funambulism, Circus Factory Cork, Cloughjordan Circus Club, Dublin Circus Project, Galway County Council Arts Office, Cork County Council Arts Office, Tipperary County Council Arts Office and Dublin City Arts Office, with funding by an Open Call award from Arts Council Ireland.
2. By this I am referring primarily to Gadamer's understanding of Aristotle's catharsis as set out in *Truth and Method* (1995), where Gadamer focuses on the social/community impacts of catharsis, but Aristotle's own *prima facie* understanding of catharsis applies just as well: "A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language ... not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." *Poetics*, 1449 b24. Hopefully, I can expand on this at a later point.
3. "In circus, no matter who you are, whether you are young or old, fit or out of shape, socially outgoing or reluctant to join a group, you will find an activity within the circus space to engage with." ("Falling Together" 24)
4. "Social circus can be thought of as an umbrella term for the use of circus arts in any caring, supportive or community building setting. In addition to the Youth and Social Circus field, the Youth and Social Circus teacher can work in different fields of education—early childhood, health sectors, social sectors and youth work. Social circus normally includes strong collaboration with other experts such as social workers, artists, health workers, teachers from formal education, or youth workers. ("Falling Together" 22)

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