



## Here's where dreams of circus life take shape

### Learning to fly

By Jessica Ogilvie, Correspondent  
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It's windy and cold, yet Kristin Finley is standing at the top of an outdoor flying trapeze rig wearing just her workout clothes and sheer rhinestone tights. She grabs the skinny white trapeze, bends her knees and leaps from the platform.

"All the way out!" yells Richie Gaona from the ground. Finley thrusts her legs forward, swings even higher and then lets go, twirling several times in midair before falling to the net 25 feet below.

My mouth is hanging open and my stomach has knotted itself into a tight ball as I watch her. In a little while, in theory, that will be me.

I'm standing in Gaona's backyard, where he has the rig set up, and I am here to take his flying trapeze class.

Gaona, 50, has been teaching regular people like me how to "fly" for years at the Richie Gaona Flying Trapeze School, which is based at his home in Woodland Hills. Tucked behind Highway 101 and surprisingly hard to find, the school features a static trapeze, a flying trapeze, bungee ropes and a trampoline.

On this particular Sunday, there were about 15 people wandering around the yard, chatting and laughing, their hands covered in white chalk. A woman walked by dressed in furry boots and pink hot pants; another jumped on a trampoline wearing red, heart-shaped Lolita sunglasses and bright-red lipstick. I briefly wondered if I'd actually discovered a secret off-season hideaway for Burning Man regulars.

Before I had time to ask, a fresh-faced woman with a big grin came up to greet me. She's Mercedes Gallup, 40, of Thousand Oaks, the nursing supervisor at CSU Northridge by day and a "flyer" by night and weekend.

A self-proclaimed adrenaline junkie, she says flying trapeze was on her lifetime to-do list — alongside skydiving and bungee jumping.

Having taken classes with Gaona for seven years, she now helps him as a teacher at the school and was my instructor this day.

"I came to one class and from the first swing I was passionate about it," she said. "It was amazing."

Besides, she said, Gaona is among the best. "He's fourth-generation circus," she said. "You don't get this kind of training anywhere else."

Gaona is a member of the renowned circus family known as The Flying Gaonas.

"I was pretty much born and raised around the circus," he said. "My family came up to the United States from Mexico, traveling with a bunch of different circuses around the country."

With them, he performed with Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey, The Big Apple Circus and later on his own with the TV show "Circus of the Stars."

Natural progression

The backyard setup that would morph into his school came about after Gaona parlayed his circus skills into a career as a stuntman.

"We set it up, and we had a lot of stunt people coming to train," he said.

From there, the school emerged organically. "Word of mouth got around," he said. "People kept coming, and then we just started structuring the classes."

As alternative workouts like pole dancing, boxing and cardio ballet become more mainstream, circus training seems like a logical addition to the scene. And indeed, circus arts schools have been popping up across the country, from San Francisco to Chicago to New York and Boston.

Gaona attributes their popularity in part to shows like Cirque du Soleil and to places like Club Med that offer introductory classes and get people turned on to circus arts as an alternate way to get fit.

"They get bored at the gym," Gaona said. "Here, you're outdoors and you're really pushing your body. It's a great workout."

Linda Karlberg, 41, of Simi Valley could be a walking advertisement for the shape one can get in from trapeze. Tall and lean, she claims her body has changed for the better since starting classes with Gaona years ago.

"I'm in better shape than when I was 18," she said. "My body is stronger and (I have) better posture. When you're hanging from the bar, you engage every muscle."

Trapeze also seems to nudge awake a long-forgotten desire in some people. Childhood dreams of running away with the circus resurface easily once prospective students find out about Gaona's school. "I ask them, Why do you want to try this?" Gaona said, "and they say No. 1, I love the circus."

In some cases, including Karlberg's, the classes serve a more practical purpose as well. "I used to be afraid of heights," she said. "It has helped me enormously. I use this as a therapy."

Healthy respect for heights'

Gaona said people like Karlberg often want to confront their fears — "but in a different way, not just climb a ladder and stand up there all day."

While I've never been afraid of heights, I do have, as Gallup eloquently put it, a "healthy respect for heights," and I was concerned about the possibility that there may be some danger involved in what I was about to do.

But Gaona insists on safety first. "That came from the first thing my dad told us: If you don't do it right, don't do it at all," he said. "He always made sure none of us got hurt. My dad was really strict about that. You've got to be safe."

He checks and double-checks the rigging, and it's Gaona himself who is responsible for "holding the lines," or the safety ropes to which students are attached. This way, he said, even though there's a safety net, he can prevent people from falling too fast or landing incorrectly.

Ready, set, go

My mind was eased, and the class got under way. (Two other first-time flyers were there with me: actor Sharif Atkins, 32 ("ER," "The 4400"), and Brandie Frias, 24.)

The goal for the day, for me, was to execute a "catch." I would leap from the top of the trapeze rig, swing back and forth from my knees, and then grab the hands of a catcher who would be hanging from a separate trapeze.

Before I was allowed to fly or swing anywhere, I had to learn a few basics. Gallup taught me the commands that would let me know when it was time to get ready, bend my knees and then jump ("Ready! Set! Hep!")

I then practiced hanging upside down on the static trapeze, about 7 feet off the ground.

Twenty minutes later, I stood on the narrow wooden platform in the air, my knees locked and my breath coming in heaves. I tried desperately to enjoy the beautiful view of Woodland Hills afforded by my lofty vantage point but found myself more focused on the breeze blowing below my toes.

Gallup was on the platform with me, as was Finley. "Look right into my eyes," Finley said as she shimmed behind me to trade places. The wind whipped past my ears as Gallup gripped my waist tightly and Finley handed me the corner of the skinny white trapeze.

"Grab it with both hands," she said. I did, holding on quite literally for dear life.

"Ready!" hollered Gaona. Nausea set in. "Set!" he yelled. I did nothing, and Gallup reminded me to bend my knees. "Hep!" I did nothing again; Gallup told me to jump.

The next thing I knew, reason, self-preservation and intuition abandoned me and I jumped from the platform. As I flew past him, I saw Gaona grinning a thousand-watt smile from below.

"Swing your legs out!" he yelled. I did. "On this one, you're going to let go!" I resigned myself to trusting him, figuring it was my only choice, other than staying up there, swinging back and forth forever. I released my hands, landed softly in the net, and let out a celebratory victory cry.

Gallup knew the feeling. "It is almost impossible to have a bad day here," she said, adding, "It's really hard to come back here and bring your problems with you."

That's the kind of mentality that flyers say gives them perspective in their everyday lives.

"I can't explain, but it applies to your regular life too," said Karlberg. "For example, I hadn't spoken to my father in 10 years, and I picked up the phone and I spoke with him. You feel brave."

Gallup said: "You might be terrified the whole way, but when you come down off that net, you develop more confidence. You feel like, if I can do this, I can do anything!"

Onward, upward

Confidence indeed; by the end of the class, I had gone from trembling at the top of the rig to swinging from my knees and successfully completing a catch. I could see why people came back week after week.

In addition to feeling immensely proud of myself, I felt as though I had fast-tracked the getting-to-know-you process with everyone I met there.

"You become kind of a family," Gallup told me, crossing one fishnet-clad leg over the other as the sun began to dip behind clouds. "You're all bonded by this passion you have for this unique art form — stay-at-home moms to directors to nurses to actors, we're all passionate about this one thing."

Even my group of beginners experienced a bond, if perhaps on a smaller scale.

"I was afraid on the second half of the ladder up," said Atkins. "I was afraid at the top waiting. I was afraid when I had to jump and let go. I was afraid at every single step. However, it's the people around who cheer you on. It's amazing to have that sense of trust after an hour."

It's also quite the workout. The day after the class, my arms were so sore I could barely lift them, and I had bruises on the backs of my knees. But I told everyone who would listen how I had spent my Sunday afternoon.

"I don't know that there's a better feeling than that," said Gallup — the feeling of strength, overcoming fear and, at the end of the day, realizing that, "Oh my God — I just flew trapeze!"



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