

Bringing Circus Arts Programming into IRIS's (Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services) 2024 Summer Learning Program as a Means to a Therapeutic Intervention: From Planning to Execution

A project funded by the CT Teaching Artist Hub 2024 Mentorship Grant

Mentee: Christian Gonzales / Mentor: Cynthia Rauschert

Workshops took place on Wednesday July 3 & Friday July 19

Report by Christian Gonzales, mentee

Mentor's note at the end by Cynthia Rauschert

[Program photos and videos here.](#)

This summer 2024 we created a partnership with Integrated and Refugee Services' (IRIS) Summer Learning Program (SLP) in Hartford, CT. SLP runs for 5 weeks during the summer months and teaches English and social emotional skills to recently arrived immigrants and refugees in grades K-12. Thanks to the Teaching Artis Hub 2024 Mentorship Grant, we were able to provide free programming to EVERY student in the program over the course of 2 full school days. Our blend of circus arts programming seamlessly fit into their curriculum and provided access to a novel expressive arts activity. Programming was customized for each age group. With grades 6-12 we focused on “power words” of life and circus (Respect, Risk, Perseverance, Confidence, Teamwork), while we took a softer approach with the younger groups (K-5) by focusing on providing the children with a sense of awe, accomplishment, autonomy, and belonging. This was a profound experience for mentor and mentee alike. Below we are detailing the steps we took to make our project happen from planning to execution.

INITIAL PROGRAM PROPOSAL

The project we proposed includes finding an organization with a focus on social services/social justice and creating a partnership with them to provide free programming which supports the organizational mission, includes a therapeutic element, and provides the individuals served access to a novel expressive arts activity which they may not otherwise have access to.

PLANNING

Researching partnering organizations

The project began by researching potential partnerships and choosing four that would ultimately be contacted. Our focus for researching were programs dealing with child health and wellbeing. From this search the four chosen were:

1. Connecticut Children's Medical Center ArtReach
2. IRIS- Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services
3. J-connect youth mentoring program
4. Kidsafe CT

An excel sheet was made to keep track of the potential partnerships. The sheet included the name, location, mission, link to website, why, contact info, next steps, and potential programming.

IRIS Example.

Name	Location	Mission	Link
Iris- integrated refugee and immigrant services	235 Nicoll St. New Haven, CT 06511	empowers refugees and immigrants to become self-sufficient and integrated into their new communities. “... facilitates programs that foster cross-cultural socialization, emotional well-being, and empowerment...”	https://irisct.org/

Why	Contact	Next step	Potential program
cross culturization and working with immigrants spanish programming	(203) 562 – 2095 info@irisct.org	contact and communicate effectively goals and possible services and programming	Circus Zone Family Balance possible bilingual programming I envision programming that empowers families such as a family balance flash mob circus style. circus zone or circus stories such as Wired Up! where we rediscover our courage

From here Christian developed his ‘why’ even more. Why are we doing this in the first place? The answer to this question was one of the most important parts of the planning phase as this is the backbone of everything we did moving forward. This helped focus our potential programming. We did this for the 4 potential partnerships including the organization mission as well.

IRIS Example:

1. IRIS- Integrated Refugee and Immigration Services

- a. **Mission:** “Empowers refugees and immigrants to become self-sufficient and integrated into their new communities.”
- b. **Why:** Refugees and immigrant families face language barriers, lack social support, and experience elevated risk of loneliness. Research has shown that circus arts promote a sense of community and belonging through skill building and working with others in groups.
- c. **Projected Program:** A customizable family event that empowers families and promotes cross-cultural socialization and play among families with bilingual programming along with themes of empowerment and rediscovering our courage. We explore the dynamics of balance and explore some circus feats such as tightwire, giant globe and balancing on each other (partner acrobatics). All included in an environment that is safe for risk taking.

Crafting the initial contact email

Cynthia supported Christian in crafting an email to be sent out to every potential partnership. This was a great exercise as this is an important step before forming the initial contact but this was also very helpful in fine tuning his objectives (the ‘why’) even more and putting into words how to communicate our goals and who we are to a partnering organization. Below is the final product for IRIS.

SUBJECT: Connecting to Offer Free Youth Programming
Hello To Whom It May Concern,
My name is Christian Gonzales, and alongside my mentor, Cynthia Rauschert, M.S., (founder of [Circus Moves](#)), won the 2024 CT Teaching Artis Hub’s Mentorship Grant awarded to only 5 pairings. We made a specific reference to IRIS, on our grant proposal because **we have a STRONG interest in working with refugee and immigrant families.**

My own interest stems from my immigrant experience and I know first-hand our work with circus empowers, promotes cross-cultural socialization, and play among families. Laughter is our language and what we do goes hand in hand with IRIS's mission.

Now that we have secured grant funding I would like to discuss a potential partnership opportunity. Our goal is to :

- Provide FREE programming which supports IRIS's mission
- Include a therapeutic element
- Provide the individuals served access to a novel expressive arts activity

We are two circus artists and circus educators passionate about using circus as a form of therapeutic intervention in diverse populations with a focus on underserved individuals and communities. Circus promotes social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual gains in health and wellness at or above the level of typical programs or activities. (You can find some of that evidence here: <http://tinyurl.com/whycircus>.)

I appreciate that you have taken the time to read this and will follow up with you in a few days. I'm looking forward to hearing back!

Sincerely,

Christian Gonzales

christiangonzales@gmail.com

Cell: 860-918-9851

Initial Contact Phase

Using an email or phone number if no email was provided Christian contacted every organization under Cynthia's counsel that we would most likely not hear back from all and if we did we still may not be a good fit so having multiple backups was important. Here are the results:

	Organization	Initial contact	Email sent?	Follow up?	Primary Contact Reached
1	Connecticut Children's	(860) 545-9700 (Mary answered and provided email)	yes	N/A	Christine Tatum - Child Life Specialist ctatem@connecticutchildrens.org
2	Family Reentry Youth Programs	(203) 838-0496 (main office) (Diane Answered and provided email)	yes	yes	No contact reached
3	Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services	volunteer@irisct.org	yes	N/A	Isabella - Manager of Education Services - Hartford idaou@irisct.org
4	Kidsafe CT	(860) 872-1918	N/A	N/A	N/A

At this point we managed to reach a primary contact and excitement towards our programming from 2 out of 4 potential partnerships. We had a meeting to decide on one. Connecticut Children’s was Christian’s top choice at first. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to arrive at a logistic ‘how’ we might implement our programming in the hospital setting. IRIS became our partnership and it was a great choice!

Start of Partnership

Christian set up a zoom meeting with Isabella, Manager of Education Services for IRIS’s Summer Learning Program where we learned about the IRIS and SLP program curriculum and goals, student demographics, and community needs. We all agreed on a potential date and kept in touch over email. Cynthia supported Christian in crafting the final programming based on the zoom meeting and sent it to Isabella to fit into their school day.

EXECUTION

Our visit was split into 2 days. Day one for older kids and day two for younger kids. The location was the Trinity Episcopal Church in Hartford, CT where the Summer Learning Program meets regularly. There were 5 groups in all (each ~20-25 students): Group 1, K-1st grade; Group 2, 2nd-3rd grade; Group 3, 4th-5th grade, Group 5, 9th-12th grade.

The plan changed a couple of times because of scheduling restrictions. Our intent was to serve all of the children in one day, but because of scheduling limitations we were unable to do that so we determined the most impact would be to give two 90 minute workshops to the two older groups over one day. The impact we had was so evident (and we had such a good time) that we offered to return to present 60 minute workshops for the remaining students on a different day.

General Student Profile

- Countries Represented: Syria, Congo, Ukraine, Venezuela, Sudan, Eritrea, Afghanistan
- Main languages: Arabic, Ukrainian, Swahili, Pashto, Spanish
- Some students arrived within a month or two of starting the program, all have been in the US for less than one year.
- Many students do not have conversational English

Event Day 1

Date: July 3rd, 2024

Time	
10:00 am- 11:30 am	Group 5
11:30 am-12:00 pm	Break
12:00 pm- 1:30 pm	Group 4

Core component is SEL, approached in a holistic and gentle way
 Exploration of power words of life and circus

Respect	Risk	Perseverance	Teamwork	Confidence
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Themes for framework

- Building trust – Begin workshop with an activity that students will succeed at immediately and build up to more difficulty and risk near the end. We began with peacock feathers (instant success activity) and ended with rola bola, which requires more risk and trust.
- Choose activities that effectively demonstrate a power word- All our activities exemplify all our power words, but we chose one that we felt modeled the word the best.

	power word	activity
1	Risk	Rola Bola
2	Perseverance	Juggling
3	Teamwork	Ball Game

- Use personal stories – To be more relatable. Christian wanted to share his own immigrant story and provide positive role modeling.
- Use Minimal English/ more body language- To make it accessible to all, even the most recently arrived student to America. Circus is perfect for this :).
- Maximize Socialization – Since this is the first week of the program, we included opportunities for students to interact with each other and break the ice with new people.

Group 5 Schedule (grades 9-12)

10:00 - 10:10 (10 min)	INTRO Our names, hellos in all languages Intro to Power words in all languages
10:10 - 10:20 (10 min)	Peacock feather Group activity feather balance
10:20 - 10:30 (10 min)	Ball game with Names Split into 2 groups
10:30-10:35 (5 min)	Finger Game Brain Exercise to simulate feeling of learning juggling
10:35-11:55 (20 min)	Juggling Scarves w/ music
10:55-11:20 (25 min)	Rola Bola A balance board activity requiring spotting from peers

11:20-11:30 (10 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">Debrief</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review power words and relate to activities • Thank you in your language • Goodbye in your language
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Additions/ improvements to Group 4 Schedule after finishing Group 5

During break we reflected on our first workshop and made some additions to Group 4 Schedule

- Addition of 2 new games at the start with purpose of taking the students out of their heads and into their bodies
- Addition of our 123 game to exemplify code switching and make connection to the impressive nature of what immigrants do every single day
- Slower and more elaborate step by step instruction for Rola Bolas to build more trust, confidence, and success in the activity

Group 4 Schedule (Grades 6-8)

12:00 - 12:10 (10 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">INTRO Our names, hellos in all languages Intro to Power words in all languages</p>
12:10-12:15 (5 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">Walk stop jump name “out of our heads and into our bodies” activity to calm middle school energies</p>
12:15 - 12:20 (10 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">Peacock feather Whole group activity feather balance</p>
12:20 - 12:30 (10 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">Ball game with Names split into 2 groups</p>
12:40-12:45 (5 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">Finger Game Brain Exercise to simulate feeling of learning juggling</p>
12:45-12:55 (5 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">Juggling Scarves w/ music</p>
12:55-1:00 (5 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">123- snap/clap/stomp game 2 people take turns counting and replace the numbers with snap/clap/stomp (code switching example)</p>
1:00-1:25 (25 min)	<p style="text-align: center;">Rola Bola A balance board activity requiring spotting from peers</p>

1:25-1:30 (5 min)

Debrief

- Review power words and relate to activities
- Thank you in your language
- Goodbye in your language

Pictures from Day 1



Picture of Equipment and White Board. Having a white board was a great tool. We encouraged students to write the power words in their own languages. Every spoken language is represented! Equipment was supplied by Cynthia's Circus Moves company



Picture of Rola Bola Activity. Performed in groups of 3. Embodiment of teamwork, positive risk taking, and trust.

Christian’s reflections after Day 1

- Body Language is powerful
- Difficulties in mixing among peers in groups but happy with the effort we put in and success we had in intermingling. At the beginning the room was divided in 2 groups one majority Ukrainian and the other Arabic speaking, we changed this up very quickly.
- Day 1 was lots of fun and much excitement to return for Day 2!

Event Day 2
Date: July 19, 2024

time	
10:00 am-10:45 am	Group 1
11:00 am-11:45 am	Group 3
11:45 am-12:15 pm	Lunch
12:15 pm-1:00 pm	Group 2

Rather than focus on the power words (risk, respect, perseverance, confidence, teamwork) we focused on **providing the children with a sense of awe, accomplishment and achievement, autonomy, and belonging via activities designed for creative and expressive movement.**

Themes for framework

- Begin with an “out of head into body” activity warm up to break the ice
- Must have peacock feather because it is literal magic to younger children and has high success rate
- Must have plate spinning because it always gives the best reactions among younger age groups
- Must have juggling because we love juggling but also its a great way to leave your mind, explore movement and be creative
- Must have time at the end where students make their OWN choice from multiple activities scattered around the room

Basic Schedule used for Groups 1,2, and 3

12:00 - 12:05 (5 min)	INTRO Hello in your language!
12:05 - 12:15 (10 min)	Warm up Clap circle
12:15 - 12:25 (10 min)	Peacock feather Whole group activity feather balance
12:25 - 12:35 (10 min)	Spinning plates Whole group activity spinning plates
12:35 - 12:45 (10 min)	Juggling scarves Intro to toss juggling
12:45-1:00 (15 min)	Choose your own adventure! Tightwire, bucket stilts, rola bolas and any of the above!

Programming was slightly tweaked to be age appropriate. For example, Group 3 was taught how to juggle 3 scarves vs Groups 1 & 2 where instead we did more of a follow the leader with 1 and 2 scarves.



Picture of Christian juggling before running into the audience

Beautiful artwork surrounding our rola bola station





Cynthia Spotting the tightwire during the “Choose your own adventure“ block

Christian’s Reflection after Day 2

What a great time! Being able to share a passion, show something new and see laughter, spirits lifted, perseverance, courage in a community that has so much going against them is beautiful.

Feedback

Feedback was ongoing between us and leadership of the Summer Learning Program. We opened it up for feedback after presenting our programming during pre-execution planning and after days 1 and 2 of our event. We were fortunate to have access to in-person feedback from the director and lead teacher as well and they popped in and participated during several of our activities during the day. There was a warm positive response by all. Here is some feedback we collected through email:

- “Thank you for sharing the videos and materials! It is amazing to see the variety of activities and just how joyful they are. I can imagine this as a great way to get our program started.”- Isabella
- “I appreciate the time and consideration you are putting into designing the curriculum and schedule for the day. “ - Isabella

Isabella, the Director of the SLP was immediately on board from day 1 and showed immense trust in our programming and mission. We are very grateful to her for welcoming us with open arms.

Mentor's Note

It was my goal through this experience to act as a guide and mirror to Christian as he moved through the process of taking a project from idea to implementation. Throughout the process I helped Christian identify and outline the steps necessary to move through each phase of the project:

- Program concept/Identifying community partners
- Grant-writing
- Initial contact and relationship building with potential partners
- Pitching and planning the program and partnership
- Writing curriculum that fits the mission, participants, and timing of our project and our partner organization
- Debriefing and revising on-site between workshops
- Final grant report

What you see in this report is the culmination of Christian's work. The experience of shepherding Christian through this process has been very rewarding, especially witnessing his aha moments in the planning phases and his sheer delight working with the children and seeing both the kids and the adults at IRIS respond so positively to his curriculum. I'm so grateful to have had this opportunity to change our relationship by shifting from supervisor to mentor and see his experience with Circus Moves and in other areas of his life come to life in his leadership and management of the partnership with the IRIS Summer learning Program.