

BC MD combined life in circus with medical school

Kristin Wingfield ran away and joined the circus, but managed to become a physician in the process. An acrobat with the Quebec's Cirque de Soleil, the 30-year-old graduated from the University of British Columbia this spring and began a family practice residency in Vancouver. Her unusual career progression may not suit everyone, but it was tailor made for the athletic Wingfield.

A stress fracture in her foot had forced an end to her gymnastics career and potential participation in the Olympics. She made the "easy change" to diving while finishing her kinesiology degree at the University of Western Ontario, and she made it as far as the Canadian trials for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. The same year, a choreographer friend with Cirque de Soleil encouraged her to audition. When the circus offered her a job for a new bungee-jumping, aerial trapeze act for its Las Vegas "Mystère" show, she accepted; after graduating from Western, she immediately began the intensive training in Montreal.

Although the Vancouver native had also applied for medical school, she didn't anticipate acceptance on her first attempt. When the acceptance letter came that summer, she faced a huge decision. "It was like a dream come true. Yet I could not make myself leave that group. It was so challenging and different from anything I'd ever done, and the people I was working with were incredible."

Her fellow artists are an eclectic and volatile company of 72 gymnasts, dancers, musicians, actors, choreographers and acrobats from 14 countries.

In the 2 weeks after the letter arrived, Wingfield kept picturing herself coming to the Cirque's Christmas premier and being desperately sorry that she wasn't part of it. "I didn't want to have that regret," she recalls.

She asked the medical school to defer her admission for a year, but was told that if she didn't accept her place she was unlikely to regain it. Ironically, she says, her athletic activities were one of the reasons she was accepted in the first place.

Two weeks after turning down medical school, she tore several knee ligaments while rehearsing some "crazy jumps" and spent the next few months in Montreal, rehabilitating after surgery. She now faced dismissal by the circus, but Wing-

field's fellow performers "fought for me," persuading Cirque de Soleil to let her coach a replacement acrobat. Four months later she joined her troupe for opening night, not as an acrobat but as player of Japanese drums.

After finishing her 18-month contract with the circus, Wingfield again applied to medical school in 1996; as predicted, she was turned down. In limbo, she took courses at UBC and performed for the circus on a contract basis.

She reapplied to UBC again a year later, and was finally accepted. Ironically, she says, the rising profile of Cirque de Soleil over the intervening years and her role in the acclaimed troupe helped her application. During medical school, she creatively combined acrobatics with studies, performing with the circus at every opportunity, including at the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in 1997 and at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City this year.

Wingfield says Cirque de Soleil's artists are highly self-directed. Choreographers give the performers a concept to act out, such as being an exotic animal, and then "pick the pieces they like" and work with the performers to meld the show together.

"What I do is flying," says Wingfield. "I have total artistic freedom and I can light people up. Taking a human performance to the utmost level — many people have never experienced that."

Last year she set out to make another dream — working with the Canadian Olympic medical team in Sydney — come true. It was an "amazing" experience that let her learn about drug doping, handling the media and practising sophisticated sports medicine. She hopes to repeat her Olympic Games experience, but next time with a sports medicine fellowship tucked into her tracksuit.

Wingfield feels fortunate to combine 2 very different worlds. "One of each wouldn't be enough; both keep me happy." As for medicine: "You can't help others unless you are true to yourself."

She says her work with the artists in Cirque de Soleil expanded her mind and helped her deal with challenging situations. And she looks forward to conveying her own balanced philosophy of life to her patients: "I believe you can make anything happen if you want it to." — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*



Cirque de Soleil

Dr. Kristin Wingfield: flying high