

## Everyday Women of Sitka: Frances (Franni) Donohoe



- **Can you please tell me a little about yourself? How long have you lived in Sitka? What types of things are you involved in here?**

I grew up in Sitka and then moved away for college and most of my twenties. I came back about five or six years ago. The main thing I am involved in here since I moved back is Sitka Cirque. The last 5 years I've been setting up and starting a business which is more than full time work. I hope that once things are a little bit more established I can start to reclaim some time. I like being involved in different kinds of community activities and Sitka Cirque is a part of that. I would like to be involved in more community activities, especially ones I am not in charge of organizing. That's something I look forward to when I have more time.

- **What is your biggest struggle right now?**

That's a hard one. I am not sure how to quantify this question as I feel I am struggling with many things. One of my biggest struggles is trying to find the balance between work and life. This is made harder in Sitka, as the job I love doesn't necessarily pay well and Sitka is an expensive place to live. I am also learning how to survive in Sitka as a small business owner. My dream of developing Sitka Cirque as a community arts program is dependent on offering affordable prices and yet, I have employees and I want to be able to pay a fair wage for their time. Ultimately, I would love to be in the position that I can offer those employees paid holiday time and things like that. I guess you could say one of my biggest struggles is how to be a good employer but also run an arts program in a small town? That takes over most of my time and my life and thinking.

- **What does a normal “day in the life” look like for you?**

Lately I’ve been trying to do more strength training on my own time because my job as an aerial instructor requires tremendous physical strength. Then I have breakfast and go to work. My mornings are spent mainly on business admin, meeting with employees and class planning. I usually have at least an hour or two a day that I am spending on planning. I keep trying to figure out how we can streamline our curriculum so teachers don’t have to spend so much time a day on planning. We are lucky to live close to work so I can be home for lunch before classes start at 3pm. Most of the time I work from 10 am until 8:30 or 9pm and that’s pretty much the whole day. Then I head home for dinner and bed.

- **What makes you proud to be a woman?**

I don’t really know how to answer that question. I don’t necessarily feel like ... to me the idea of being prideful in something is just not really something I think much about. I don’t think of myself as being a woman but rather being a person.

- **Do you have something you’d like to say to other women in Sitka?**

Just from the top of my head ... no. (At this point the interviewer remarks that Frances teaches a lot of women in her studio who come there for different reasons and encourages her to say something to that. There must be something you offer to these women. What is that?)

I think there are many different reasons why women are drawn to Aerial. People come for one reason and end up staying for another reason. Aerial appeals to many different people. We have students who are looking for fitness but they want something that is more mentally stimulating than lifting weights in a gym and aerial is both mentally and physically challenging. We have students who really love the performance aspect of what we do with our productions. And a lot of students who love the community that is created both in classes and through our performances. A lot of our performances are collaborative activities drawing from the larger community of Sitka for help with costumes, sets or other things. There is a real creative outlet for people not just in the performance element but also in everything that goes on behind the scenes. I think a lot of women are drawn to aerial who are adrenaline junkies. It appeals to people who have a dance background, climbing background or a gymnastics background. Aerial appeals to a lot of different demographics and ages. That is something I really like. We have all different ages involved from 3 years old to women in their 60’s. Mothers and their children. It’s an activity that a family can be involved in together.

I enjoy seeing the transformation of people who come in. Many beginners are nervous and hesitant and don’t think they’ll be able to do anything. As they make it through class they realize they’re actually able to do more than they thought they could. Aerial is wonderful in that it is physically demanding and requires a lot of strength but there are stepping stones. There is a lot you can do as a beginner who can’t do a pull-up. That’s a big part of what keeps people coming back. They see the improvement as things get easier. They appreciate the support system, the social aspect of the activity and having people with you to try something that is genuinely scary. Because remembering how to tie a knot with your feet when you are upside down or high up is scary and exciting and seems at first impossible. But like many things that seem impossible at first it’s not.

- **Is there anything else you would like people to know about you?**

There are a lot of things that influenced me in the decisions on how to run the program and what I'm trying to create at Sitka Cirque. There are many different experiences that influence my teaching and creative style that come from various artists I have worked with. But one thing that I don't often get a chance to talk about is the time I spent working at a refugee center The Helen Bamber Foundation in London [UK] where I ran a women's dance group for female refugees from around the world. Some women joined the group by choice and some on recommendation by their therapists.

I volunteered for about four years. During the time I spent working with this group I learned to go much deeper as a teacher and understand the transformation that can happen at a level that sometimes is easy to not see. When I started working there I hoped to help people and make a difference somehow. It can be really easy to have grandiose ideas about what that means and ideas about how you're going to impact something. The first couple of years working with this women's refugee group I felt like I was failing constantly and I was actually not making any difference at all. Until one day I started to adjust the way I looked at things and really began to appreciate and value what the little shifts in a student meant.

Most of the women in my group were dealing with situations that were far beyond anything I could do anything about. They needed lawyers and doctors to take care of the big legal stuff they were dealing with. But what I could do was to provide a safe space once a week for a group of women from all over the world, many of whom didn't speak English, to come together just to play and to dance and to bond.

During this time I heard many atrocious yet inspiring stories from survivors. Stories were often brought to light because of a class activity and it became my work to witness this story and see if I could help reconcile people's story with their physical body. I began to see how a dance game could shift somebody's idea about themselves, in particular for most of these women, how they thought about their bodies. Many of the women in my class were victims of the sex trade. Most of them had been sold into slavery from a young age. There were many times with this group I was amazed to see how movement games had the power to actually transform how somebody thought about themselves, their body and sense of empowerment. Let me share a story to illustrate this.

When I was younger I studied Kattak which is a form of North Indian classical dance, and I loved it. I have a real love of hand dancing and sign language. In addition, it is a great tool to use with beginner students to help ease them into dancing. Most people feel more comfortable moving their hands than any other part of their body. Anyways, one day in the group, we were playing a game with hand dancing and I had given the women an assignment. The assignment was to make up their own hand gestures. In the group was a young woman who did not want to participate and was completely withdrawn from the activity. When I talked to her about it and asked her what she felt she said "I don't like it, I won't do it". Then she talked about how as a girl she had been forced to dance for men for their entertainment. This young woman was from Bangladesh and the traditional style of dance she had been forced to learn and perform uses a lot of hand gestures. With further discussion she discovered that she didn't like any movements that felt feminine. She didn't want to feel feminine at all. To be feminine and to dance or move in a feminine way felt disempowering for her. So I suggested she explore hand gestures that felt masculine and asked her what that would look like. In moments she transformed. She lit up. She loved finding masculine movements. She went from being completely shut off to reveling in the empowering discovery of her own masculinity. There is a depth to teaching movement that goes far beyond physical material.

I have only very briefly looked into dance movement therapy. It was something I always wanted to do but never had the time. This is basically what I was doing at the refugee center. I was just untrained

and learned on the spot. I was lucky that Helen Bamber who created the foundation had a really strong belief that learning how to deal with trauma is not something that you necessarily go to university to learn. You just have to be able to hold the space and adapt to whatever comes up. She was an incredible woman. I had the privilege of hearing her speak about her work in the concentration camps after World War II. I believe this is where a lot of her philosophies came from.

Dance movement therapy transcends language and cultural barriers a lot of times. It isn't about processing thoughts but it is about dealing directly with the physical side of trauma. I feel like during the time I was at the Bamber Foundation I also went through a transformation. When I started working there my idea of how I was going to help people came from a desire to do good, but this desire was also essentially ego driven. I was thinking more about what impact I could make rather than the people who were in front of me and what they needed. I was trying to figure out how to help people rather than witnessing and facilitating their journey. Often when big stuff shifts the transformation is in a way you can't imagine. It's always in a way and at a time you can't predict. This change in my perspective is one I heard mirrored by many people who worked at the foundation. I think it is not uncommon for therapists and people hoping to make a difference to be transformed by the people they try to help. (Interviewer: The transformation happens on both sides.) Yes, it does, it absolutely does. This rawness is something I kind of miss. I feel I learned more during my time at the Bamber FOundation than at any other time in my professional life. However, it was also a drain. Emotionally, it was really tough. (Interviewer: We are witnesses and that leaves traces on our souls. There is a name for it, it's called vicarious trauma. That's what you witnessed there, too. You offered this outlet to women to overcome their traumas.) In all those situations I felt like I probably learned more from them than they did from me. I was constantly inspired and in awe of the women in front of me. What incredible strength.

One of the things I love about teaching Cirque is helping women find their strength. So often as women we are told to look a certain way, petite or thin. We're told this by the fashion industry, with movies, in school, in advertisements. All over we see images of what a "desirable woman" should look like. Since I have been doing aerial regularly my upper body and my shirt [size] have gone up two to three sizes. Finding tops for athletic women with bigger shoulders is incredibly difficult. You have to look for either yoga or tennis clothes. The image of what women should look like is so specific and it isn't necessarily about strength, certainly not physical strength. (Interviewer: It is about weakness because a weak woman is a woman that can be controlled.) Yes, for example high heels ... so much of the image is to be petite, dainty and small. So that is just one of the things I love about cirque women, these women are coming to aerial classes because they want to get stronger and being strong is empowering.