



# CIRQUE *du* Wavy Gravy

Legendary clown offers adults a fun circus-camp  
getaway | Story and photos by David Volk



I am within inches of fulfilling a lifelong dream. I have run away and joined the circus, and I'm about to become that daring young man on the flying trapeze who flies through the air with the greatest of ease.

Above: Wavy Gravy gives his Morning Reading, which ranges from interesting trivia to books such as *Green Eggs and Ham*. Left: Camp attendees cheer for fellow camp participants.

There's just one small detail in my way: It's not enough to dangle by my arms from the trapeze bar. I also have to do a backward somersault between my arms, then push my legs up and over the swing and hang upside down by my knees.

Twice already, I've missed at pushing my legs through the gap, and I don't know how much longer my wobbly arms will be able to support my weight if I miss again.

As I swing my legs back up and the blood comes rushing to my head, I'm thankful someone is steadying the swing, and I'm praying I don't fall to the ground.

OK, I admit the ground is only 4 feet below me, and I could touch the safety mat with my feet from where I'm hanging, but that doesn't mean falling

isn't a big deal. I am still boldly going where no Volk has gone before. I want to conquer the trapeze.

I am pursuing my lifelong trapeze dream at Camp Winnarainbow, a circus and performing-arts camp in Northern California. If Disneyland is The Happiest Place on Earth, and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey run The Greatest Show on Earth, then this weeklong getaway has to be the greatest camp on Earth. Each year in June, adults from all over the world gather at this site in the town of Laytonville, just 110 miles northwest of Santa Rosa, to develop trapeze, trampoline, stilt-walking, juggling, clown and magic skills, and accomplish numerous other circus-related feats. When the adult camp isn't in session, children's circus camps are offered throughout the summer. The motto for both camps is "Toward the fun!"

"Adult camp is just like children's camp, except we don't make you brush your teeth, and you can stay up as late as you want," says internationally known clown and 1960s counterculture icon/Woodstock emcee Wavy Gravy (aka Hugh Romney), now 72, who founded the camp with his wife, Jahanara.



David Volk develops enough skill on stilts to get a drink from a tall fountain. He also conquers the trapeze, and does well in mask-making and improv, but his best circus camp event turns out to be the trampoline.

Northern California is where wine lovers go to tickle their tastebuds with adult beverages. Winnarainbow is where adults go to be kids again. It's camp the way you wished it had been when you were young, especially if you were a bit klutzy. Instead of poking fun at the athletically challenged, participants encourage each other when anyone's having trouble mastering a routine, and instructors go out of their way to ensure success.

For example, when one of the would-be trapeze artists can't complete a backward somersault, our teacher, Gabriel, lowers the trapeze swing several inches and suggests that the woman try a new routine that features moves such as standing on the bar with one leg, with the other leg extended, and sitting on the bar with both legs and both arms extended. As a result, the woman—a dancer from Japan who speaks little English—emerges victorious.

When she looks at photos from the trip, she'll see herself suspended in air with a smile that could light up Ukiah, 50 miles away, rather than the half-grin, half-grimace that good sports paste on their faces to show it doesn't matter that much when they fall short. Even if it was something they always wanted to accomplish.

"I never want a kid or adult going away feeling that they failed doing what they want to do," Gabriel says.

**W**avy Gravy and Jahanara's goals include creating a safe learning environment for campers, encouraging campers to try new things and increasing campers' self-confidence.

The sleepaway camp got its start as an "improvisational day care" for the children of parents who were attending a spiritual retreat in 1974, Gravy says. He enlisted friends who happened to be actors, jugglers, mimes, dancers and artists to keep the kids amused, and the day care became so popular as it was repeated each year, it evolved into a circus and performing-arts camp in 1978.

So many parents of campers told Gravy they wished Winnarainbow had been around when they were little, that the man who lent his name to a flavor of Ben & Jerry's ice cream added a weeklong adult program in 1983.

The 2008 adult session has attracted about 60 participants from as close as Berkeley to as far away as Japan. Campers range from 18 to 86 years old and are a mix of returnees from previous years, people who liked what they'd heard about the camp, and people who were intrigued by Gravy's life.

Gravy took childhood walks around the block in Princeton, New Jersey, with Albert Einstein, shared a room in the early 1960s with Bob Dylan (who used Gravy's typewriter to write the first draft of *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*) and co-founded, in 1978, the nonprofit Seva Foundation, which is dedicated to "finding skillful means to relieve suffering caused by poverty around the world."

Camp attendees also include many fans of the Grateful Dead. Gravy and his wife moved in the same circles as Jerry Garcia's band in the 1960s, and the couple worked in the kids' room backstage during Grateful Dead concerts, entertaining children of the Grateful Dead and of audience members who were friends of the Grateful Dead.

Suffice it to say, that means there's a heckuva lot of tie-dye on camp participants and staffers alike. And teachers with names such as Silver, Oxygen and Magic Steve. And Wavy. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

**I** didn't know much of this when I signed up. I just knew I wanted to go as far out of my comfort zone as I possibly could. And I wasn't going to let my klutziness be an excuse. High wire? I'm ready. Stilt-walking? I'm so there. Human cannonball? I am so ... over theeeeeere.

If only they had a human-cannonball class.

My first class, juggling, should be a breeze for someone willing to be shot out of a cannon, but, apparently, juggling requires a level of hand-eye coordination I don't have. I do fine with one ball; I just can't keep track of two.

True to my promise not to view myself as a klutz, I cheerfully stick it out for the entire hour-long class. It seems like other people who've never juggled before are rapidly progressing to keeping three flaming daggers in the air in the time it takes me to master a single ball, but I soldier on. Although it's clear I've chosen the wrong class for my first endeavor, at least no one laughs.

Fortunately, there are plenty of options to choose from. Eight classes are typically offered during each of the three class blocks each day, and campers can attend whichever classes they want.

Ever the dabbler, I take a number of different classes so I can learn as many skills as I can. Other students focus on one or two skills so they'll be able to show off during the Big Show, a three-hour talent extravaganza at the end of the week, in which participants give their final, grand demonstration of what they've learned.

At the close of the first day, during which we take just one class, many campers bed down in large tepees positioned around a tepee circle, with five or more attendees to a tepee, most of us slumbering in our own sleeping bags atop thick foam pads provided by the camp.

One of my tepee mates, a Winnarainbow veteran and prison-system dentist nicknamed "Painless," is smart enough to have brought his own cot.

Attendees who prefer more privacy bring their own tents and set up camp nearby. Although I was prepared to rough it, I am pleased to find that there are water

closet-style bathrooms with flush toilets rather than outhouses, and individual-stall showers with hot water.

We plan to wake at 7 to the pleasant sound of Gravy blowing a conch shell in the distance. But two of my roommates are part of a large Japanese dance troupe that does everything together, including getting up early to attend Clown Zen, a yoga class that begins a full hour before the gentle conch wake-up call.

Hearing people moving around at 6, I fear I've missed the conch alarm, and I jump out of my sleeping bag, dress and follow them. It is a mistake I resolve never to make again.



s the week

rolls forward, and I find notable success in mask-making and improv, I look forward to showcasing these skills in group performances.

The days quickly settle into a pleasant routine: breakfast at picnic tables outdoors with a main dish such as eggs and bacon, plus a variety of serve-yourself options for vegetarians and vegans, including oatmeal, polenta, yogurt, fruit and granola. Lunch generally means items such as homemade soup, and an organic-salad bar with many ingredients picked on the property that morning. Dinners range from salmon caught in the ocean off the nearby town of Fort Bragg to assemble-your-own burritos.

The breakfast meal is followed by Gravy's Morning Reading and a 20-minute stretching session. Attendance at both

is optional, but I never miss the reading, which is an intriguing juxtaposition of the silly and the spiritual.

Sitting on a director's chair on a stage with a rainbow backdrop, Gravy looks like the grandfather you always wanted. Not the cranky one who yells, "Get off my lawn," but the cool aging-hippie one who wears tie-dyed T-shirts like a second skin and sports a jaunty hat on his head, with shoulder-length gray hair spilling out. Picture attorney Gerry Spence in a bowler.

Gravy's readings typically start with a page out of *The Book of Origins*, which covers everything from the famous people born that day to when certain foods were invented. He then reads a few passages from whatever other books strike his fancy. On the first morning it's *Green Eggs and Ham*, and *It's Disgusting and We Ate It! True Food Facts From Around the World and Throughout History*. The selection the next day includes a piece titled *Why Dogs Smell Each Other's Butts* (this is adult camp, after all). Still another day it's the 19th Psalm and a few lines from the mystic poet Kabir.

Then it's off to the first of two classes before lunch. A third class is offered in the late afternoon. I can attend classes such as trampoline, mask-making and tap dance, whose names make it pretty clear what I'll learn, or go to headscratchers such as Crazy Wellness and Clown Dance Theatre, taught by Vancouver, B.C., clown Txi (pronounced "Chee") Whizz.

After yesterday's juggling debacle, I head straight for stilt-walking, taught by a guy named Silver. No last name, just Silver. No matter how securely the stilts are fastened to my feet and knees, it's disorienting to stand more than 8 feet tall on nothing but two narrow wooden sticks with narrow foot blocks 3 feet off the ground.

I normally walk with a long, straight-legged stride, but that doesn't work on stilts. I have to lift each leg high with every step I take. And I must keep moving, or I'll fall. From a distance, I'm sure I look like Frankenstein's monster. Sticking my arms in front of me to maintain balance reinforces the image so much that I'm tempted to groan menacingly to complete the picture.

My walk is more one continuous swaying stumble around the stilts course, with its row of poles, than it is the graceful gait I'm hoping for, and every uneven spot or hole in the grass is a potential crisis. I may

be terrified, but I'm enjoying every step.

The assistant teacher insists I can let go of his hand and do just fine. I never quite manage to walk on my own, but I do manage to stay upright and even take a drink from a 7-foot-tall water fountain.

After the second class—during which I learn to play improvised musical instruments such as a drinking straw—everyone gathers at the Rainbow Stage for the daily talent show in which students show what they've learned so far.

Participation isn't required, and I'm grateful I don't have to display the extent of my learning curve early in the week. But later in the week, after I take an improvisational-acting class, I partner with a Japanese butoh dancer named Hiromi to do a sketch based on audience suggestions.

When participants decide the scene should take place at a school graduation, I play a dean who awards non-English-speaking Hiromi a magna cum laude degree in English as a second language.

My favorite class turns out to be trampoline, which I pick up immediately. I loved jumping up and down as a kid, but never knew it was possible to do any tricks other than front and back flips. In a matter of minutes, I quickly go from a warm-up combination of half-pirouettes and seat drops to a belly-full-twist, which, apparently, is no easy task. In fact, I do it purely unintentionally when I misunderstand teacher Gail Meadows' instructions. She really wanted me to do a seat-twist-to-seat, which involves bouncing from a seated position, turning around in the air and landing, seated, facing the other direction. The belly-full-twist involves bouncing from a seated position, landing on my knees, rebounding to land on my belly, spinning around in the air in a full twist and landing on my belly again. Even Meadows is surprised, and a small round of applause follows. Now, it's my turn for the 10,000-watt smile.

There are plenty of ways to fill the four hot, idle hours between lunch and the late-afternoon classes: hanging out, chatting with fellow campers, practicing for the Big Show, doing art projects or taking the short van ride or 10-minute walk to 3.5-acre Lake Veronica to ride the water slide and swim out to anchored George Raft for sunbathing. (Fans of classic movies will recognize these names as punny references to Hollywood stars Veronica Lake and tough guy George Raft.)

Occasionally, there are special events

such as Beach Blanket Bingo at the Lake and the Costume Tea Party and Croquet Tournament. Some attendees come prepared with getups, but most of us hit the costume shop, a large open-air building filled with more racks of pants, shirts, skirts, hats and accessories than you can honk a clown nose at. You can borrow as many clothes as you like throughout the course of camp, even if you don't need them for class. One camper proves to be such a costume lover, she wears a different outfit to every class.

Evenings are a time for bonding events ranging from a teacher talent night to a fire circle around which campers share stories. Valerie Alley, a participant from Oakland, captures everyone's heart when she recounts how she got out of a traffic ticket by persuading a policeman to promise not to cite her if she could make him laugh. She acts out what happened next by putting on a pig snout and singing, "Be a Ham."

One of the most popular evening events is the Kick The Cannes Film Festival, a costume event in which we dress up like celebrities ranging from Mark Twain to Goofy and gather to watch clips from films such as *The Three Stooges* and *Popeye*, along with short original films participants made and brought with them. The night starts off with a walk down a red carpet, with Gravy interviewing each of us glamorous attendees as the conversations are projected on a big screen.

Some campers act the part of film critics attending the festival to judge the footage. This year's panel of critics includes Roger Eggplant, who gives all of her reviews in Esperanto, and a Japanese camper who claims to be Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's daughter. The audience roars when she reviews one film by saying, "I like the dog. It reminds me of my boyfriend."

**A**s the week rolls forward and I find notable success in mask-making and improv, I look forward to showcasing these skills in group performances during the Big Show—especially since, sadly, trampoline is the only skill that isn't featured in the show.

My mask is a papier-mâché creation derived from a cast of my face and painted sky blue with clouds on top. It will be part of a parade of masks. For the improv act, I'll play Ahmed McGilligcutty, a Middle Eastern man with a Scottish accent who runs up against language barriers.

But as far as I'm concerned, my defin-

ing moment at camp comes late in the week when I stare down the trapeze. Although getting good enough to perform in the Big Show would have meant taking trapeze every day and would have hampered my dabbling, I study trapeze enough to complete the backward somersault and hang upside down by my knees.

Then I stand on the swing on the balls of my feet, and arch my back, with my arms extended in victory. Not only that, but I conquer a second routine, which ends with my suspending myself above the bar, pushing against the sides of the rope with my arms and feet—and looking sort of like the figure that gets drawn in a game of hangman.

It's a nerve-racking moment. I know I will be able to maintain my balance as long as I remain calm, but if I stop to think about what I'm doing, I'll panic. To a casual observer on the ground, I'm only a few feet up, but the adrenaline pumping through my body tells me I'm in the big top, high above the crowd.

I maintain my pose just long enough for someone to snap a photo. Gabriel, who is holding the swing, encourages me to do more, but my arm muscles seem ready to give way, and I'm happy to rest on my laurels. It is a moment of triumph in a life filled with dropped fly balls, overthrown pitches and botched plays at the plate.

And the best part is, everyone else in camp has a similar moment.

WHEN THE FINAL DAY DAWNS, we awake to the sounds of Jimi Hendrix's *Star-Spangled Banner* and the start of the annual pillow fight. Although old-timers are prepared, newcomers like me are caught flat-footed because we don't have pillows—I've been resting my head on a stuff sack—and now we don't have any way to defend ourselves, although students from the Mime Clown class join the fray in slow motion by miming pillows.

That's the moment—when I observe their quick thinking and uninhibited joy—that I know I'll come back. Only next time, I'm bringing two pillows. ■

*Seattle writer David Volk hasn't totally given up on juggling.*

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*Horizon Air (800-547-9308, [www.horizonair.com](http://www.horizonair.com)) flies daily to Santa Rosa, and to San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose, all gateways to Camp Winnarainbow. This year's adult circus and performing-arts camp will be June 16–21. For more information, visit [www.campwinnarainbow.org](http://www.campwinnarainbow.org).*