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## Sardine Family Circus entertains scores in San Francisco

Posted by: Aneri Pattani August 13, 2015

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Forget balancing a checkbook.

Orion Griffiths spends his days balancing atop a wooden board perched on a rolling cylinder. The 27-year-old street performer entertains scores of San Francisco spectators who look on in awe as he juggles clubs and stands on his hands, without falling 10 feet.

Most people would probably opt for the checkbook task, but Griffiths loves his job. He's a member, along with his parents and adult siblings, as part of the Sardine Family Circus – named for a funny scene in which the Griffiths piled out of a packed RV.

"When you make somebody smile and laugh when you're performing and you shock them from the talent you're doing, then you're serving somebody," Griffiths said. "And I believe there's no greater thing than serving somebody."

Orion and his seven siblings grew up as part of the traveling circus that their parents, John and Pauline Griffiths, began in the 1980s.

The couple, who lived in England when they were younger, had often discussed exploring the world. They didn't consider it seriously until John met a group of musicians called the Tibetan Ukranian Mountain Troupe in 1984 at the Stonehenge Festival for traveling performers.

"I just happened to be driving by one day – wearing a suit, driving a nice car, going from one business appointment to the next," John Griffiths recalled, "when I got to meet this small circus group."

After speaking with the members about their lifestyle, John and Pauline decided they wanted to experience life on the road as well.

The timing was perfect. The parent company for the alternative fuel store that John ran had just gone bankrupt. He decided to finish his last few contracts and sell the store.

They set out the following spring – living out of their RV, homeschooling their children and performing music wherever they went. It wasn't until later that the family took on circus acts.

"It started with just music, and the circus slowly crept in and then overtook the music," John said.

The children picked up juggling, acrobatics, contortions and unicycling on the road. Orion was 7 when he started performing.

"Traveling was fun because we would get to do so many different things every day," Orion said. "We missed out on normal school and that part of life, but we did develop a very good sense of what the world is really like."

The lifestyle also strengthened their sibling bonds.

"We didn't have a group of friends," Orion said. "Your close friends were your brothers and sisters. You develop not just a respect, but a full trust, and it definitely makes it a little easier [to perform together]."

In 2003, John decided to bring the family to the United States after seeing American performers in Switzerland. He wanted his children to develop the same level of showmanship.

After years performing in Boston and Key West, Fla., the Sardine Family Circus moved to San Francisco about five years ago. They frequently perform at Pier 39 and Fisherman's Wharf.

Now the act centers on three siblings: Orion, Alex, and Meisje, as well as Meisje's husband, Kevin. John and Pauline have mostly retired.

But the family is still a unit, they all agreed.

"We're very family-oriented," Orion said. "You can do your own thing, but you stay tight as a group."

John said the best performances come from being a family.

"We're a team," he said. "When we're all on stage together, we're a force."