

Jump Because!

Laughter in the Air in Richmond and Across the World

by Natalie Mesnard

Paula Ogson, Lily Christon, Sarah Branigan and Erin Johnson jump. They jump for fun, they jump to relax... they jump because. And they share these jumps on their amazingly popular web site, Jump Because (jumpbecause.com), a blog that has become a worldwide photographic project, chronicling the joy of jumping across nationalities, cultures and geography.

It all started when the four women took a trip to Virginia Beach last winter. Stressed out by work and grad school, they spontaneously decided to take pictures of themselves jumping on the sand. "It's just something to do," says Paula. "It's kind of like laughter therapy.... When you're laughing you feel better, and you laugh when you're jumping around with your friends." They had so much fun, the four women continued to take these jumping pictures in places around Richmond and during other vacations.

They kept the pictures on the web site Flickr until the NPR program Weekend America contacted Sarah with a request. They asked to feature one of the group's jumping photos in a short article, asking, "Why do you jump?" The answer, "We jump because," became a mantra for the group and eventually a web site to collect the pictures and encourage others to submit their own jumps. The four women had no idea that people from Africa, Japan, Egypt, Vietnam, Italy and the rest of the world would soon be submitting photos, along with stories on where and why they had jumped.

Now, says Paula, "We've gotten so many jumps from all over the world... from places none of us have traveled to."

Everyone who sends in a picture gets a personal e-mail and a moment of fame when their jump is featured on the site. "We communicate with everyone who submits photos," says Paula. "People tell us, 'I'm so happy I found your site, I've been jumping for years.'"

This spring, Sarah brought Jump Because into the classroom. She is a faculty member at the VCU Art Education program, and she asked students to do a project entitled "JumpBecause—For a CAUSE!" Participants took pictures of jumps to raise awareness for a nonprofit or charitable organization. Students submitted jubilant images of themselves jumping with animals, school buses, and library books for organizations such as the SPCA, the Virginia DEC (Division for Early Childhood) and AmeriCorps.

Though Jump Because has always been about just having fun, Paula and Lily can imagine Jump Because taking off. Sarah's project inspired them: "We would like to have this be a way to do fundraising for different causes," says Paula, "kind of like Race for a Cure, but Jump for a Cause," adds Lily. They have also talked about featuring the pictures in a gallery or publishing a coffee table book.

In the meantime, the web site will continue to inspire small uplifting moments in the lives of these women and many others. "It makes me smile," says Lily. No matter where Jump Because goes, these four women will always keep a sense of joy in the air. **V**



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V Natalie Mesnard, a freelance writer, is looking forward to submitting her first jump!