

CWM Audio 70-14

Interview with Nancy Davies

July 23, 2017

Part 1

Interview conducted by LaVahn Hoh

LaVahn Hoh: This is 23rd of July. This is LaVahn Hoh and he's about to interview Nancy Davies.. We're sitting in the library at Circus World Museum. The year is 2017.

LaVahn Hoh: Alright, how did you get started in the circus?

[00:00:30]

Nancy Davies: Well, I'm first-generation circus so this came out of the blue. I remember going to some shows or seeing shows on TV of Ringling. My crush was Tito Gaona ...

LaVahn Hoh: Ah.

Nancy Davies: And still is. He's my big celebrity crush and still is to this day. I went to the show when I was 18 with some people. And I remember sitting there going, "Wow. Wow," cause I hadn't been in a while. And then I had the opportunity to work at Americana Amusement Park one summer in Middletown, Ohio before I went to college. I was hired by someone who knew me because they knew I did theater in high school. They had built this dome sort of structure, permanent structure so they were gonna have a circus for the first time there. It was the Tommy Hanneford Circus. I was hired as the spieler along with someone else that I knew from high school. And so ...

[00:01:00]

LaVahn Hoh: You might want to tell what the spieler is.

[00:01:30]

Nancy Davies: Oh, I'm sorry. That's a good point. Most people know it as a barker.

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: Exactly.

Nancy Davies: Calling people into the tent.

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: As a friend of mine said one time, it's a grinder or spieler, not a barker. Only dogs bark.

Nancy Davies: That's right. I like spieler better than grinder. It was great fun. I never thought about the circus in any other way other than entertainment until working there until I got to be friends with people on the show. I was seeing all the backstage stuff, seeing them every day. And it just, suddenly, it appealed to the performance and theater in me. I just fell in love. I did it again the next season and it was just amazing. I've always said I think that circus people are some of the hardest-working people in show business. And they are.

[00:02:00]

Then I would go visit these people on ... my friends, when they would play dates either

[00:02:30] nearby. I was from the Cincinnati area so I definitely saw them in Cincinnati. I went to Baltimore and some other places cause I wanted to go see them. They would usually put me in costume and throw me out there. So one time, I was styling in the elephant act. And another time, there was the gorilla gag. I was the person. I was out there in costume and doing, with the person in the gorilla suit. Then we'd pull someone from the audience because I knew it. And they'd say, "Okay, go do that." That afforded me some great fun and opportunity that I never thought existed. I really did want to become-join the show, be a show girl. I considered it my sophomore year. I almost left after my sophomore year to join the Hanneford Show. And I thought, "No, if I do ..." I feared I would not finish college. So I didn't do it.

LaVahn Hoh: Excuse me. This was with Tommy and Struppi?

Nancy Yes it was.

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Nancy And what was amazing was, at that time, Nellie Hanneford was eight-years-old and I was hanging out with her in between things and she would want to go on rides. Half the time I'd be sick from the spinning rides. And there was Catherine Hanneford, Tommy's mother, 80, I don't remember, 85 at the time. In the ring when they're doing that traditional horse act, that comedy horse and she's got the whip in the middle ring, all in her gown and sparkles, made up. What a gift to see that.

[00:03:30]

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Nancy I didn't realize their history at the beginning. Circus was essentially new to me. I didn't know until a little bit later the Hanneford history and how storied that is. So it was amazing that that was really my first show.

[00:04:00]

[00:04:30] So I didn't go off and join the Hanneford Show. But I made friends and I went to see some friends. They were performing for a show. It was an indoor date at a small building with George Hubler, this producer. He was announcing his own show for this day because it was small, and he was not good. Afterwards, I walked up to him, introduced myself and I said, "Hi, I'm Nancy Davies. I'm friends with so-and-so. I love circus and I'm sitting there listening to you announce and you need to hire me because you were not good and I will be better." And he did. He asked me ... You know this was just spot dates, when I could on weekends because I lived, at the time, in Lexington, Kentucky. He would send me dates and, "What can you do?" I said, "I can do this one and this one."

[00:05:00]

[00:05:30] Now, I never made money because I traveled to ... Lorain, Ohio was my first date. I was staying at a hotel so I'm sure I lost money every time. But it was wonderful and, like I said, Lorain, Ohio was the first date as a ring mistress. I'm in circus reports. I can prove it. And I remember, one person on the show ... I was actually just talking with a friend last night. It was-my mind just blanked out-[inaudible 00:05:47] Morillo, maybe? He had a top act, I think. No, that doesn't seem right. Oh, no. See now I've forgotten.

LaVahn Hoh: It'll come back to you.

[00:06:00] Nancy: A few years later, he was ringmaster on Carson-Barnes when they were still that five rings. I went up to him and he remembered me and it was just such a joy. I moved away. I moved to Hawaii and that kind of ended my circus career for a little bit.

[00:06:30] By the way, when I was in Americana Amusement Park as a spieler, I think I'm the only person who has photos of ... My little camera that I had ... of Mark Karoly being shot out of a cannon for the first time. It was delivered and it was set up so he could practice. We were all out there and I have these photos that I actually have to get to him, to see that because the show was closed down. On that show was LouAnn Jacobs. It was, again, people that I now know, wow, this was fantastic. The circus was always in my heart so I wasn't ...

[00:07:00] When I came back to the mainland, I wasn't athletic so I knew I was never going to be an aerialist or something, but I always kept up with circus and visited friends and eventually ... I was a publicist now at this time, and I went to work for an agency in Chicago where I was living, who I knew had the Ringling account. They hired me and Ringling became my account. I was the Chicago publicist for Ringling Brothers for about four years. I went out to visit the show, again, in Cincinnati cause somebody said, "Hey, why don't you come out?" Cause I was from that area and I wanted to go one more time just to ... "Hey, it's nearby. I'll just take vacation." And when I came back, I realized I was never more happy than when I was with circus. My mother had just passed away and my dad had already passed so I thought, "It's now or never."

[00:08:00] Let's see here, I was 40 when I started interviewing and it took a year I was interviewing. The two companies that I wanted to work for was either Big Apple or Ringling Brothers. Ringling was my account so that was the dream. I got interviewed several times. They didn't have an appropriate place for me on the show. Almost a year to the date of interviewing, I was hired by Big Apple Circus as their company manager. About a year of doing that, then Ringling called and asked me to come over to the Red Unit Assistant Production Manager. So I went over there for a short period of time. Actually, I'm sorry. I'm kind of jumping all over the place.

LaVahn Hoh: That's alright.

Nancy: When I was, oh gosh, in my late twenties, I was still trying to pursue circus. I was working in television at the time as a news producer. I still wanted to work in circus full-time. I interviewed ... I was offered a job twice by Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers to be the advance person. The first time, I just thought, "I don't know if I can do this. It's not enough money. I don't know if I can do the whole bartering with tickets" and I turned them down. Then it came back around. They reached out again I'm not sure how many months later and I talked to them. And the money came up and thought, "I know I'm scared, but maybe I'll do it." But I had just met someone and started dating them and I turned it down. A year later, that job never came back and the man was gone and I thought, "I'm never doing that again. If the circus comes up, I'm going."

[00:09:30] People know me as, my friends and family, always know me as "Circus Nancy." One

[00:10:00] person calls me "Circus Lady." People have known me since my late teens or twenties who I'm, maybe now, reconnecting with recently have said, "Oh, I'm so glad you still involved with circus." Or they'll ask about it if they haven't seen me in years. It is a part of me and I'm so grateful and glad to be a part of the community.

LaVahn Hoh: Wow, you've worked with some excellent shows and excellent people.

Nancy Davies: Yes I have and been very grateful. Roy and Cindy Wells are good friends of mine. I've known Roy for, oh gosh, over 30 years. Cheryl Jones has been with the Big Apple Circus for, oh gosh, over 30 years. I met her on Hanneford. We've been friends for that long.
[00:10:30] I've worked with Jonathan Lee Iverson and Bello Nock and David Larible. Had them in my car, taking them places, getting them up early for early morning public relations events.

LaVahn Hoh: So, where was your office with Big Apple?

Nancy Davies: I was on the road.

LaVahn Hoh: You were on the road with them. I'm surprised we didn't meet then at some place along the line.

Nancy Davies: I know.

[00:11:00]

LaVahn Hoh: Cause I hung out there a lot [inaudible 00:11:03] trailer.

Nancy Davies: I was usually in the show office.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Nancy Davies: Yeah. I wonder if we did but just in a passing, "Hi. How are you?" [crosstalk 00:11:12]

LaVahn Hoh: Two ships passing. And I would come up to the front office and talk with Paul or Michael.

Nancy Davies: I sat to the left. So I was right there and we didn't realize it. But now we're meeting.

LaVahn Hoh: That's right.

Nancy Davies: Because you always meet people in circus. You never know when.

[00:11:30]

LaVahn Hoh: Absolutely. Who was manager when you were with the Ringling Show?

Nancy Davies: On the Red Unit when I was the assistant production manager, it was Mark [inaudible 00:11:39].

LaVahn Hoh: Oh yeah. Gosh. Did you know Steven Warner?

Nancy
Davies: I didn't. I was there a brief time. Unfortunately, my time ended very quickly there due unpleasant circumstances. So, while those circumstances were unfortunate and unexpected and heartbreaking to me, it's okay in the sense that I still love Ringling and I love circus and I love the people and I love the community. I don't love what happened, but it's also part of my history and, I am a part of it. I'm okay with that.

[00:12:00]

LaVahn Hoh: Oh, cool. Yeah.

Nancy
Davies: I didn't get to eat in the pie cars so that's a disappointment to me, but other than that, and I did live on the trains.

[00:12:30]

LaVahn Hoh: I never ate in the pie car on the train, but I did in the back yard, as it were, a little baby pie car.

Nancy
Davies: Yeah. Exactly. I got junior, but [inaudible 00:12:41].

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: Exactly. Well ...

Nancy
Davies: Oh, may I?

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: Oh, please. Just keep going.

Nancy
Davies: At Tommy Hanneford's funeral-I don't even know how long ago that was, 10, 12 years ago.

LaVahn Hoh: I'd say that, if not more.

[00:13:00]

Nancy
Davies: Maybe more. And I went and my friend, Cheryl, was there. We were talking and all of sudden she said, "Oh, there's Tito." And I looked around and said, "Tito?"

LaVahn Hoh: The Tito?

Nancy
Davies: "Tito Gaona?" She said, "Yeah." "Oh, oh, oh. I've loved him my whole life and I want to me him." And she said, "I'll introduce you." And she takes me over. I've worked with celebrities. In the entertainment world, I've worked, obviously, with celebrities in the circus world. It's all good, all fine. It doesn't intimidate me, but meeting him, I was like that little girl. I was stumbling and stammering and I, "Hi, hi. I've just ... Oh for so many years, I've loved you." And I thought, "Oh, gosh. He's gotta be thinking, "Who is this?"

[00:13:30]

LaVahn Hoh: It was his groupie.

Nancy
Davies: Right. Exactly. And what a thrill it was for me to have met him.

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: That was one of your highlights.

Nancy It was. I was kind of hoping he might be here for this Ringling reunion.

Davies:

[00:14:00]

LaVahn Hoh: So what was your life on the train? What was that like?

Nancy That was interesting. I unfortunately, don't have much to say about it. I was there for
 Davies: such a short period of time. I did have a quarter car. So I was being shown management, I got a bigger car. I didn't expect that large of a car. That was really nice. When I came in, I got my big living space. The next part is the bedroom. And then I had a large bathroom with a shower and a washer-dryer, a stack washer-dryer.

[00:14:30]

LaVahn Hoh: Did you have a tub?

Nancy I believe I did have a tub.

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah. We interviewed somebody the other day. That was a big plus.

Nancy I never expected this. I believe the Red Unit, the cars were newer. Wasn't that the train
 Davies: that had derailed a few years prior?

LaVahn Hoh: Uh-huh.

Nancy So I knew that it was the nicer ... So that was quite a surprise. A few people told me that
 Davies: "You don't want to do this or you want to do that." I didn't have a lot with me because when I joined the show, I was at Big Apple. I left. They wanted me at the beginning, about January 2. But Big Apple was still at [inaudible 00:15:10] Park in New York and my trailer was still in there. I had to fly back to get it out when the show closed. I didn't have a lot of my stuff. I basically took a suitcase down and stored my trailer.

[00:15:00]

[00:15:30] Big Apple let me keep it up in their facility in Walden for a little bit of time until I could figure out what to do because I wasn't sure if I wanted to take my trailer and live. I really wanted to live on the train so I had to make that decision. So I didn't take a lot of things. It was kind of stark in my room. I forgot, I believe it was a married clown; maybe it was the boss clown. Would they have had a quarter car?

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Nancy Okay. I think ...

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: They would have had a large ...

Nancy I believe they were the ones who had the other side of my door to the bathroom.

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: Wonder who that would have been?

[00:16:00]

Nancy I'll have to look that up. I honestly don't remember. I was kind of a blur.

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: What year was this?

Nancy
Davies: That was 2003.

LaVahn Hoh: When we get over the 2000 mark, I know fewer and fewer of the who's boss and who's ...

Nancy
Davies: And I just-I do have a hard time remembering cause it was a bittersweet time for me and it was a difficult time. One of the people who was so kind to me, I have to give a shout-out to Silvio Laskov. He kind of saw what was happening with me and, with this ...
[00:16:30] I'm not going to name names because, we've all had, in our lives, difficult experiences. But he saw what was happening, how I was being treated, and what was being done by, really, one person who caused all the problems. And he just was so good and so kind and gave advice-just in terms of the circus. He wasn't necessarily about what was
[00:17:00] happening, but I could talk to him and I felt like I had a friend. And I so appreciated that. I knew some people on the show, but mainly I knew Jonathan Lee Iverson. I knew Bello Nock. I did get to talk to them a bit but I was not going to go, "Oh, woe is me" with them.

[00:17:30] I didn't really know anyone else. There were some clowns I had worked with but I don't know if they didn't remember me. As a local publicist, they see so many of those. So, I kind of felt alone in a lot of ways so I really appreciated Silvio's kindness.

LaVahn Hoh: So what are you doing now?

Nancy
Davies: Well, I'm still a publicist. I've gone out on my own. That's a great question cause circus is still a love of mine and so I've built some things around that theme. I was with a company, a public relations agency for nearly 11 years and I recently left them. Let them
[00:18:00] try something new and try something on my own.

[00:18:30] It felt like time to do that and so I was thinking about ... I do, right now, public relations, marketing communications and I thought, "Okay. I don't want to be just a freelancer. I want a company name. What is it going to be?" I have a few domain names that I own and was thinking, one day I'll do something with it. And I went, "Oh, I know, I'm gonna call my..." Because I have this domain name and I think it's perfect. And so my company is called "In the Center Ring" because I own inthecenterring.com and my tagline is "Putting people, businesses, and organizations in the spotlight."

LaVahn Hoh: Perfect.

Nancy
Davies: So I kind of keep that circus feeling with that. If you look on my LinkedIn profile, it starts out by saying, "I'm a purveyor of ballyhoo." And then, I also started a website called betheringmaster.com where I am taking the lessons of the circus and making them life lessons, because they are. Life is a circus. I do hope to actually develop that into something more at some point, but right now it's just kind of a way for me to express those life lessons and thoughts. That's what I'm doing. You could see I'm still surrounding myself with circus.
[00:19:00]

LaVahn Hoh: It's in your blood. You have sawdust.

Nancy It is.

Davies:

LaVahn Hoh: You have sawdust in your blood.

[00:19:30] There was a gentleman down in Oakland who came up to visit me. He was writing a book at the time on the analogy of business and the circus and that the CEO was the ringmaster [inaudible 00:19:42]. It's interesting how what you're talking about, how you can pull those things from the circus and brought it back to your own life, what you're creating.

Nancy I think it's, once again, we talk about community. You and I have had the great honor of
Davies: talking to people, doing these interviews to get people's histories. I know, for me, one of
[00:20:00] the big threads through all of those, people talk about the community and the family and, you can take ... Everything about the circus, you could take back to your everyday life. You don't have to be a part of the circus.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Nancy You know I talk about-I'm trying to think-I can't think off the top of my head, but you
Davies: hear it all the time. People talk about, "Take a leap. Take a leap of faith" or that Zen saying "leap; the net will appear."

[00:20:30]

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Nancy And it's really true, you've got to take those thoughtfully, but go for it. You talk about
Davies: cherry pie and doing extra jobs so you can get some extra money. Well, in this day and age, what a lot of people are doing, they're calling it the gig economy. It's the same thing. That's their cherry pie.

LaVahn Hoh: Right.

[00:21:00]

Nancy There's just a lot of ways to equate what happens in the circus. I think it's ... Anything
Davies: I'm writing about, people have heard. You've heard it umpteen different ways because it's motivation; it's inspiration. I'm just serving it up in a different way that may resonate with people, that I hope will resonate because when you hear something one way and you, "Oh yeah." You hear it another way, "Oh yeah." And if you hear it this way, you go, "Oh yeah. Okay. I get it."

[00:21:30]

LaVahn Hoh: I love it when somebody gets an "ah-ha" moment when you make a leap from the circus into their life. You say, "See this connection" and "Bing," a light goes on and they go, "Oh yeah."

Nancy Well it's interesting, because a lot of people in my life ...no ... yeah, I would say a lot of
Davies: people, aren't circus people meaning, they don't really like the circus. They don't think

about it. They've never been or think they don't like it. They're really afraid of clowns so they don't go. My whole life, I'm like, "Come on with me. Come on and let me tell you things about it while we're sitting there."

[00:22:00]

And I remember this one friend from a few years back, she really didn't want to go. She said, "I don't like circus." "Have you ever been?" "No, and I don't like it. I'm afraid of clowns and I don't want to go." And her big thing was truly, "How do you get your mail? How do they get their mail? I'm worried about how they get their mail on the road?" That was the funniest thing that she fixated on. I explained how people got their mail. You know, they send ahead to an address or in a case like a Ringling Brothers or a Big Apple, it goes to the corporate headquarters. Then they send it to the city where the show's gonna be. I took her to a show and I was explaining everything. And by the end of it, she said, "Oh, my gosh. I loved it. I had no idea. I really love what you were telling me." And then she understood it better. And I thought, "Yes. Okay. I've changed one person, my goal, one person at a time."

[00:22:30]

[00:23:00]

LaVahn Hoh:

With my class I always talk about the first time you go to a basketball game or a football game, you have no clue of what's going on and you don't pay any attention to it. Well, same thing when you go to a circus. If you don't understand what's happening. If you know a Risley act, you know what they're gonna do is a Risley act. Are they gonna do a double or a quadruple on the trapeze and all of these different elements that, to me, makes the circus even more interesting. That's what ... My students wanted me to sit in the middle of them. And so I'm going left and right with information.

[00:23:30]

Nancy
Davies:

I don't know why, when you were talking about this, but it just reminded me. I'm gonna share a story that happened while I was on the Red Unit as a assistant production manager. It was a show, in that brief time I was with it, it was interesting. A lot of things went wrong for me just because the whole atmosphere for me was not right. For instance, we were doing the elephant walk the first time and I've done elephant walks before as a publicist, and I know Mark Gebel. And things are great, okay, fine.

[00:24:00]

I'm walking along and somebody said something and I turned, I'm walking forward, and I turn around to look in the back, but I'm still walking forward and I stumble and I start tripping, tripping and I'm falling, falling. I finally fall, thankfully, over to the grass area near the sidewalk. I didn't fall in the street and Mark said, "Are you okay? You okay?" I'm like, "Yeah, yeah. I'm fine." And I'm just sitting there so embarrassed, "Oh my gosh. Everyone saw that. Mark just saw it." But, that wasn't the story I was going to tell you.

[00:24:30]

[00:25:00]

When I was on that unit, and I don't remember the city. I know we went to Alabama. It might have been Alabama. I don't think it was Spartanburg. I think they ... a lot of cities. And this was when Bello was in the show. He did a high wire with someone else. Unfortunately, the name is escaping me. I'm on the floor during the show. Another, I think it was Mark Gebel's act, maybe, that was going on. They were putting rigging for the high wire. They got it up and everything was great. And all of a sudden, I hear this, and I know other people heard ... You heard this big kind of crack. And I thought, "What was that?"

[00:25:30] The next act is Bello and this other gentleman on the high wire. They go up and, suddenly, about two minutes, maybe, into the act, the whole rigging collapsed, which I'd never witnessed this type of accident before. They both fell. I think they fell off the bag. Bello hurt himself, but was not severely injured. He was able to come back out and assure the audience and continue the show. The other gentleman was more banged up and they actually had, in this building, they had an emergency facility so that he could get checked out right away. But to have that firsthand, first of all, that shock of ... And obviously, whatever that crack was that we heard that caused it.

[00:26:00]

[00:26:30] There was something, when they put it up, that happened. I never learned what it was. But to have that moment of, "Oh, my gosh." And I'm barely on the unit, having started. I'm not sure what to do yet. I was [inaudible 00:26:33]. You know you're gonna check on that other performer. But to hear the band strike up and, of course, here I go. You know the song that they when there's an emergency.

LaVahn Hoh: Stars and Stripes Forever?

Nancy Davies: Yes, thank you. You hear the band start that up, which I never thought I would hear in my lifetime and the clowns come running out, everything that you know happens in an emergency. And the show seamlessly continued. Clowns were doing things until the next act could get ready. Eventually, Bello came back out and it was fine to the audience. Everyone just lept into action. It was such a scary moment, but it was such an amazing moment to be on the floor and to witness this. It's something I never thought I would see. Thankfully, the other gentleman was not seriously injured. He was back in the show, I think, about a week or so later.

[00:27:00]

[00:27:30] LaVahn Hoh: This wasn't Bello and Bowe tour?

Nancy Davies: No.

LaVahn Hoh: Bellobration or something?

Nancy Davies: Yeah. I was still a publicist then. And, in fact, if I may tell a funny story about Bowe.

LaVahn Hoh: Sure.

Nancy Davies: We, I think that was right after 911. I think that was the year. All media kind of shut down in terms of entertainment, anything that wasn't hard, serious news. We're coming up on the show in Chicago, goes there in November and stays for months. And, they were just loosening up and starting to do PR at that point. Usually, we would have a different TV live shot on different days cause the stations wouldn't ever want to do it on the same day. In this case, they all agreed they would do it on the same day. We just put people in different rings, different stations. And to have all the acts that we could just kind of just interchange or give them something different.

[00:28:00]

[00:28:30] Of course, we had Bowe who was the star of the show and we would, as publicists, we would bring food for the crew, the TV crew and the performers and the show crew, anyone who was there. There was a new Krispy Kreme Doughnuts that had opened up

right next to the arena and, one of the things we always bring is doughnuts, of course. So I brought all these Krispy Kreme doughnuts. I noticed that the trainer kept giving-that was Larry Carden.

LaVahn Hoh: Larry Carden, yeah. Did the show with Bowe.

[00:29:00]

Nancy Oh yes. I saw him, actually, a few years ago in Kenosha, Wisconsin, when they were
Davies: playing high grounds. But I noticed he kept giving Bowe, feeding him Krispy Kreme. And we were not supposed to take Bowe off site. I leaned over to the regional publicist who was standing next to me and I said, "You know ...