

CWM AUDIO 11

KIM SUE VALLA INTERVIEW, SEPTEMBER 2, 2013

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Speaker 1: Okay. We are now rolling. We are with Kim Sue [Valla 00:00:06], it is at Circus World Museum. It is September 2, 2013. Maybe just as a start off Kim Sue, maybe could you just describe maybe your family history just a little bit and then how, and obviously since you come from a show family, but how did you kind of get your start?

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Kim Sue Valla: Okay, I was born into the circus business, and my mom and dad were performing on the Gil Gray Show when I was born, which is an old time circus, well 30, 42 years ago. My mom is Joanne Wilson. She's done everything there's to do in the circus. She's been an aerialist, an animal trainer. She's trained elephants, horses, dogs, camels, llamas, monkeys, just about anything except for tigers. My aunt Trudy trained tigers. On my mother's side I am fourth generation, although my mother, my grandfather and my grandmother were Diamond and Connie Wilson, and that's as far back as we really know.

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We know that they were in the circus and they were generational, but they didn't really talk about their ancestors, so we don't really know a lot about my mom's side of the family. My dad's side of the family, my dad is Carl Wong. He came over as a Chinese acrobat, the Jim Wong Troop. They performed on older circuses, of course, Ringling Brothers. Gil Gray. That's how my mom and dad met, it was on Gil Gray. They married. Unfortunately they got divorced shortly after that, but I had a double circus life then. I had the circus my mom was on and the circus my dad was on. I

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kind of, I had, I mean I grew up in the circus.

Speaker 1: Was there every any thought or question of doing some other kind of line of work?

Kim Sue Valla: Yes. When I was 18 I booked my first gig all by myself, and it was at Memphis, Tennessee in Liberty Land, which is non-existent. I did my single trapeze for George Corona Circus. They also had like singing and dancing shows and I became friends with all the singers and dancers. They all went to college and they all had normal lives, and this was just a summer gig. I did, I quit the circus, I rented an apartment. I bought a car. I went to Memphis State University. I said, "I'm not going to be in the circus anymore. I want an education and I want to be a normal person." That lasted

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a year, and my dad paid for my college, I just had to pay for everything else. In one year I was so broke and miserable and I got a contract to go to Puerto Rico with Circus [Tianny 00:03:12]. I got an offer, and I jumped at it. I said, "Yeah. Town life is not for me right now." Ever since then I've jumped into the circus.

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Made me appreciate it a little more. Then, just about five years ago, my husband and I decided the fate of the circus, you know, it's basically a day-by-day thing. You

[00:04:00] don't know if you're going to get paid tomorrow. There is no security, there is no, we don't know where we're going next year, you know, it's very insecure, un-secure. So we tried to stay home. We bought a house. We started an RV business, RV repair business, of course, because that's kind of what we know how to do. We gave it a year, and again we were both so miserable. We had another contract offer for Walker Brothers Circus and we jumped at it, and said "As long as our body lets us, we're going to be in the circus." When our body fails us, and we're forced to stay at home, totally forced, then we'll try to stay home and be normal. As of right now we're on a good run. We have been working with great circuses, great people and we're having the time of our life.

Speaker 1: How did you meet your husband? I know that the newspaper article had said that you had known each other since childhood.

Kim Sue Valla: We were circus kids. Kind of like Vincent and Grace and Faith, you know, just playing together. The circus separates, you go do a different circus, then it comes back together. Acts always work together and then separate and together and separate, in Sarasota, when all the kids would go to the movies. We would all go to the movies, all the circus kids, for some reason all the circus kids stick together. Vlastek was working on a circus ...

Speaker 1: With luck we can drown that out.

Kim Sue Valla: Hence, the circus! We just, circus kids, started dating. We were together for a couple months, not together, we dated for nine months, then we grew apart and we didn't see each other for three years and then when we saw each other again we decided to make it more serious and commit to each other. That was when we were, I was 18 and he was 17.

[00:06:00] Speaker 1: Okay, okay. How do you decide what sort of act that you perform? I guess, this might be a question that would maybe [inaudible 00:06:03].

Kim Sue Valla: That's a good question because when Vlastek and I got together, I did cradle with my brother, just a partner. I would hire a partner, train him. I was always an aerialist, that's what I wanted to do, that's what my mom taught me, was to be an aerialist. So when Vlastek and I got together I said, "We're going to do cradle," and I tortured him, poor guy. He had to hold me and he had to do everything I told him. He had to listen to me. We did aerial cradle, we still do, but that was my contribution to our act. His family did unicycle.

Speaker 1: Okay, so that's what unicycle-

Kim Sue Valla: For generations. Yep. That's why his family came over to America, was for the unicycling [Bertini 00:06:54] troop. Back then of course it was like 12-15 people. They toured with Ringling and Big Apple Circus and it was a big, big troop act. Then, you know, as a troop nowadays it's hard to keep troops together because you don't get paid as much and it's not all family. You gotta like compensate more. The

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[00:07:30] troops got smaller. Two immediate families and Vlastek had his family, they did their unicycle act and his dad's brother split up and they did their unicycle act. It was like a bunch of separate unicycle acts touring with separate circuses. They couldn't afford to stay together. So hence, that's the unicycle act.

Speaker 1: How did the [inaudible 00:07:45] trampoline?

Kim Sue Valla: The trampoline, to tell you the truth, Vlastek did that before we got together, the year before we got together. The lady on the show, Netta McMann, which was Netta Dupsky, she's a very old timer. She said, "Vlastek, we need some sort of comedy in the show. Can you just put together something quick? Here, use that trampoline over there. Just do something, we need something." It evolved and evolved and evolved to what it is now, and it's always to us been an act that, he just made it up to get by.

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[00:08:30] Believe it or not, it's the act everybody wants. We find it like, wow, this act that he ended up doing really was just a, "Can you do something really quick? We just need a filler. Just put it in there and we don't care what you do, just give us six minutes." It turned out to be, it's the act we're making our living with right now. We want to push our unicycle act because now we have incorporated our children. That to us, what better way to make your living with your whole family in the circus ring together? There's nothing else like that.

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Speaker 1: At what age do you start your children doing the unicycle events? At what age do you start to bring them into the-

Kim Sue Valla: With Vincent, because he was our first, we're very protective and we didn't let him really come into the act until he was about three or four. We kind of wanted to shelter him a little bit. With Violet, she couldn't wait to get in the act and I can't keep her out of it now. I held off as long as I could, she only started performing last year and everybody said, "Why don't you put her in the act?" I said, "Because the moment I put her in the act she'll never go out. She'll want to work every single day of her life and I want to give her a bit of a childhood." Now I mean she ...

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[00:10:00] Speaker 1: So maybe there is some natural hesitation as a parent, do you want this, the life that you chose, are you ...

Kim Sue Valla: Yeah, it's hard because once they get that, it's like once they get the fever, it's not like they're ruined but it's, it's like that's it. They'll never be normal.

Speaker 1: What's it like then really as a, and maybe, again this maybe comes to both your experiences and what you're seeing in the experiences of your children, you know, life on the road? It is I think, so unique. One thing that, a question I come up with my wife who's a schoolteacher, I think it mentioned in the newspaper article that you know, Vincent gets, what was it? About three days of schooling, you know, during the week or so, how does that work? What is, is there a routine?

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Kim Sue Valla: It's difficult. There can't be a routine. We don't have a routine.

Speaker 1: Do you do the schooling, is this like [crosstalk 00:10:53]-

Kim Sue Valla: Vlastek and I homeschool him, and we always make the joke, "Oh my god, we're in fifth grade. We thought when we graduated fifth grade we'd never have to do it again." It's very difficult, but it's important to us so we, it's probably one of the most difficult things about being on the road, is home schooling Vincent and giving him the equal opportunity that every other child has. I asked him, "Would you like to stay home and go to school with normal kids your age and play with them and have friends and play soccer and baseball and football?" He is so smart, he said, "Mom, why would I want to read about these things in a book? We're doing them."

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I said, "Okay, you can play baseball with the elephant," you know? I mean, so a lot of the things he does, we try to take the opportunity and take him to the places, the historical places. We'll drive him by Hoover Dam, we took a day. Did the Hoover Dam. How many kids really have been there? Set their feet on the Dam and firsthand experienced it? You know, we were in St. Louis last summer, we did everything we could. Every, we went to the Arch, we sent home postcards to all the kids. They thought it was really cool because they had never ever been to St. Louis, let alone St. Louis Arch. They've read about it. They never actually went. There's a lot of kids that don't leave their hometown until they're, I know people that's never left. [crosstalk 00:12:34].

Speaker 1: If ever, yeah, yes. Some never do.

Kim Sue Valla: Yeah. It's just, it's amazing you know? So Vincent gets to, and Violet now. She experiences it firsthand. For instance, when we were coming here all we could talk about is, "We can't wait to get to Baraboo. We can't wait to get to Circus World." She had in her mind that Circus World was something, like it's got to be something because they keep talking about it. Finally, when we got here she was like, " We finally made it to Circus World!" It was closed. She's like, "It has a really little playground." Wait till you go to Wisconsin Dells Violet. She did, she was like, "That's a small playground."

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Speaker 1: Well, but that's important to her. From that age and that perspective.

Kim Sue Valla: Yes. Yes.

Speaker 1: Indeed. Is there a part of the country, I'm just thinking with traveling with your children, is there a part of the country that you guys have not been to yet? I mean, in, you know, traveling around?

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Kim Sue Valla: The west, we try to stay local to the East Coast, mid, you know, what is that, mid-Eastern Plains there. The farther we travel, the more money it takes. So if somebody calls us and says, "Hey, we have 10 days for you out in California," and somebody calls us and says, "We have the same 10 days in Pennsylvania," we'll go for the Pennsylvania because it's closer. We're closer to home. I don't really care

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for California. I've been there myself. Maybe when the kids get older we'll venture out that way, but right now all of our work seems to be up and down East Coast. Actually, Wisconsin's the farthest west we've been in a long time.

Speaker 1: Really? How many shows have you worked on?

Kim Sue Valla: Too many to remember.

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Speaker 1: What is the longest stint you've had on a show?

Kim Sue Valla: Well, right now we've been Royal Hanneford Circus for, it's probably going on eight years, and it's one of, it's a very old circus in America and it's a big show. We've been lucky enough to keep our positions and be very versatile to stay, you know, because sometimes they say, "Well, we can't really use a unicycle again, we've already had it four years." So that's where we go, "Okay, well I can do foot juggling because I also do foot juggling." "Okay, that's something different." You know? So we try to be, nowadays you have to be versatile. Hey Heavy!

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Speaker 1: We're conducting an interview, be quiet.

Heavy: You have a building. You have a building.

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Speaker 1: This is Heavy Burdick, who is the wagon superintendent, who is coming into our interview area here. So we have another voice recorded for posterity.

Kim Sue Valla: Yeah, but this is my theater so, I don't know what Tristan thinks.

Heavy: I won't say no more, next thing I say might get me in trouble.

Speaker 1: Earlier we were talking, last week you mentioned when you were young you had a chance to meet people like [inaudible 00:15:53] Gunther Gable Williams, and others. What are the notable personalities that you've encountered in your career?

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Kim Sue Valla: Well, I probably would have to say Lou Jacob, Gunther Gable Williams, Stroupy Hanneford, she's still alive. She's my boss, and this woman has done everything and has every story. You can't think up stories like this. I actually wish, sometimes we'll be at a barbecue and she'll just tell a story, and I really wish that I would have recorded her because she's 82 years old. She's been in the business her whole life. She was married to Tommy Hanneford who was an equestrian show producer, he was not such a nice guy sometimes and some of the stories she has to tell is amazing. Gunther to me, to me now is probably, it makes me sad that people my age and younger, they don't know who he is.

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This guy, I mean I just went up to the office to get a piece of paper and I passed by his boots and his jacket and I took a picture of it just so I could always remember it

[00:17:30] in my head. I seen him wear that costume, and as a child just, I think as a child I though he was amazing too. It wasn't just the hype. You know Ringling of course made him their star for years, but this guy what he did with animals, it was amazing, and what a nice guy he was backstage. Really he was a family guy, and he loved his animals, he loved children, he loved people. It was not a show. Now when [00:18:00] I go to Ringling, I look at all the animal trainers and it's kind of like they're, they have a shadow over them, you know? You have to try to live up to something that Gunther did because he was amazing.

Speaker 1: What was Lou Jacob like?

Kim Sue Valla: Lou was, he was very quiet, he was already older when we were on the show. His daughter Dolly was my dad's very good friend, and anytime, because my dad was a [00:18:30] single guy, anytime I needed help or to be fed or to be watched, or my hair brushed, I would always go to Dolly's train car and her dad was always around. He was quiet. He was not, and actually when you watch him clown, he was kind of more of a quiet clown. He wasn't loud and he was, he didn't mind things, but he just, he was him and you just embraced him.

[00:19:00] He didn't need to talk to you, or he was just a quiet guy that just, you know, you could sit there and not say a word to him and just love him. That whole family is an awesome family. His two daughters are still alive, and I believe Dolly's mom, you'll [00:19:30] have to ask, Jean, her name is Jean. The whole family, for having such success the whole family is very, very down to earth. Now Dolly is with Pedro and they do Circus Sarasota, and she's wonderful too. You know, she was brought up by a really very, very good man.

Speaker 1: I know that we're getting close, I don't want to take, I know that you have to [00:20:00] prepare for a show, but I guess at this point is there anything that you think that you know, you'd like to discuss a little better that we haven't talked about yet? Or is there any other anecdotes or is there any you know, I guess any parting thoughts that you might have?

Kim Sue Valla: Well, my hope for the circus is that we can keep it going.

Speaker 1: Hey folks.

Kim Sue Valla: Yeah, just, you guys can wait in the lobby and we'll open the doors. They'll let you in.

Speaker 4: Oh okay. All right.

[00:20:30] Kim Sue Valla: Thank you. It's hard to see a future for the circus in some ways. The economy is getting better and people are getting tired of fake entertainment, which is good, because they're starting to realize that going to the movies you know, staying home, video games, it's not a family thing. You know? You can't go to the movies and talk to your child and say, "Hey look, look that girl is riding on a horse and she

[00:21:00] just," you know so I see people now wanting to be with their family and saying, "Hey, what better way than, let's go to the circus. It's in town. That's the real traditional family thing to do, is take my family to the circus." That might be coming back. I just hope that it's not too late with the animals.

[00:21:30] The animal activists, the permits, you know I saw the movie that was playing at Al Ringling, and it explained to us how the circus parade kind of, it fizzled out a little bit because the roads were better. They didn't want the wagons and the horses and the elephants walking on them. They were getting electrical lines put up, the wagons wouldn't fit under them. There was all these things that it just went against the circus parade. Eventually they quit doing it. I hope it doesn't happen with the

[00:22:00] circus now. We have so many things against us. So many things against us that we're becoming stronger, it's just, there's not a lot of us anymore. A lot of us really are saying, "We have to figure out our future and we don't know what's happening next year so maybe we should stay home and start a business." You know? That's just, in the old days we used to go home and practice for the new season, now we

[00:22:30] have to go home and continue working, whether it's a restaurant job, just to make it to the next season.

Speaker 1: It's a way of life that's slowly disappearing.

Kim Sue Valla: It is. Being here at Circus World, it's like being back in time. It's like taken for granted almost, you know? I mean, because this is what this place is, it's circus. I look at it different because I've never been to a place that was dedicated to my life. We've always worked in parks, we've always worked somewhere in the summer. Six Flags. They don't even, you know, they don't even care about a circus at Six

[00:23:00] Flags, it's just somewhere for them to go to sit down between the roller coasters. Here it's different. Here this is a museum dedicated to my life long profession. So, I do fear though that maybe circuses like Cirque de Soleil will take over, which I'm not saying that's bad. They've ...

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Speaker 1: Two minutes.

Kim Sue Valla: They've given us ways of presenting the circus that is different, different is not bad, but it's change. You know? The traditional circus has already, it's already gone.

Speaker 1: So now can it evolve into another form and survive?

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Kim Sue Valla: Let's hope it does. I know that I can. My family, we can evolve. We can take the acts that we do and we can do it anywhere and evolve and change for the audience or the venue that we're at. A lot of performers, you know, this is what they know, this. If it's not this, they just go home and retire or start, you know, dry cleaning business or something to that sort. I know we're embracing our life right now.

[00:24:30] Really, really embracing it, and I'm trying to tell Vincent, "Vincent, love what you do man. Love what you do and learn, learn school because I don't know if it's going to be here for you." That's the reality of it. We're trying to teach him though. He can

[00:25:00] take a unicycle and do an act on a stage anywhere, it doesn't have to be a

traditional circus.

[00:25:30] We can evolve. We are very versatile and that's what makes us so happy and viral in our entertainment. You know, we don't need things exactly the way it's supposed to be, we can evolve and change, but a lot of people can't. Especially animal people, it's hard for them. We're getting less and less, you know, and the other day I read something that said something bad about animals in the circus and it's just like, "How, these people treat their animals better than they treat their children, how can people say this?" I mean I grew up with an animal trainer and my mom's elephant was first. Then she would take me to the mall or cook dinner or you know, she always took care of her animals first. That's her livelihood, why wouldn't you?

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Speaker 1: Maybe with that we can conclude the interview. Kim Sue, thank you for taking the time today.

Kim Sue Valla: Thank you for interviewing me.

Speaker 1: I hope we have another conversation again some day.

Kim Sue Valla: We will. Maybe next summer.

Speaker 1: Maybe. I hope so.