

CWM Audio 70-10

Interview with Sister Bernard Overkamp (Sister Bernard) and Sister Dorothy Fabritze (Sister Dorothy)

July 20, 2017

Part 1

Interview conducted by LaVahn Hoh

LaVahn Hoh: I am [LaVahn Hoh 00:00:03], the interviewer, and it is July 20th, 2017, and we're at Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. I'm here to talk with ...

Sister Dorothy: Sister Dorothy Fabritze, Missionary Sister of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Dorothy:

LaVahn Hoh: And?

Sister Bernard: I am Sister Bernard Overkamp, a Missionary Sister of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Bernard:

LaVahn Hoh: All right. So I'll start off with what did you do with the Ringling Bros. Circus?

[00:00:30]

Sister Dorothy: I worked seven years full time with Ringling Bros. Circus. During the seven years I was employed, I started two years on the prop crew, but my job as prop crew was to open and close the curtain during showtime. This was followed by teaching school for the children that traveled with their parents.

LaVahn Hoh: And you?

[00:01:00]

Sister Bernard: I was working for seven years on the show as a helper in the seamstress department, mainly in the ladies' wardrobe to help the performers to get dressed, quick change, and whatever it involved with.

Sister Dorothy: After the seven years, we changed our approach as pastoral ministers, and we were no longer employed. Since 2012, we have visited Ringling Bros. Circus, all three units, I would say approximately every year for three months each.

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LaVahn Hoh: Wow. Okay. Let me ask you this, what are the dates you began and ended your work? Do you remember the dates?

Sister Dorothy: All right. We began working with Ringling the show year 2004. We ended at the end of 2010.

LaVahn Hoh: So that's for both of you.

[00:02:00]

Sister Dorothy: And then this visiting for three months at a time, 2012 until it closed 2017.

- Dorothy:
LaVahn Hoh: Okay. So I know a lot of people would want to know why. Why did you want to work for Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus?
- Sister Dorothy:
[00:02:30] Our religious congregation's involvement in circus ministry began in the year 2000. I'm the one that sort of found circus ministry. I'm a returning foreign missionary. I spent 16 years in Papua New Guinea. I returned to the United States in 1993 and was determined to find what I thought was missionary work. My superior asked me to start a development office for our congregation's missionary work, and I did that for five years, but I really wanted to do the missionary work not fundraise for it, so I kept pursuing a knowledge of where missionary work would be for me.
- [00:03:00]
- [00:03:30] I heard about circus ministry in 1996 at a missionary convention. It was in the exhibits. I'll say in the spiritual world, I was pursued by God to embrace it, but it took me four years to get there. I chose circus ministry because, in my mind, missionary work is reaching out with the love of God to people who are not getting the message yet or have the message but aren't responding to it. When I heard about circus ministry, there were 50 to 60 circuses. They had Sister Joel and Sister Priscilla doing circus ministry and Father Jerry Hogan. When I saw those numbers of two sisters and one priest for 50 to 60 circuses, I said that's missionary work. So that's why I embraced it, to be the living, breathing presence of God amongst the circus people.
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- LaVahn Hoh: How was that received by the circuses when you ... How did you approach them?
- [00:04:30]
- Sister Dorothy:
[00:05:00] Very early on, Father Hogan invited me to our annual circus ministers meeting in Florida in January. At my very first meeting, I became aware that one does not just walk onto a circus and say, "Here, I'm ready to help you." That was my first lesson. So from there, I always approached Father Hogan to say I would like to visit this circus first just for a day, and he would go the route of the general manager, getting me permission to meet the people, go backstage and so on. So my experience of how did circus managers or circus owners receive us, very favorably I must say. But I accredit that to Father Jerry Hogan's work over the years and to the work of Sister Joel and Sister Priscilla giving us a good reputation.
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- LaVahn Hoh: Okay. At the beginning of your time with Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey, how did you feel? Were you comfortable, overwhelmed, awestruck, intimidated?
- [00:06:00]
- Sister Bernard:
[00:06:30] It certainly was a different kind of work than what I was used to. For instance, the hours, working in the wardrobe, doing the load in, load out, very heavy work. And sometimes they would say to me, "Sister, I think you shouldn't do this. Do a bit easier work." And I would refuse it because once you belong to a team, you work with the team, you do what the team does. So from the beginning, I felt very comfortable with the ones I was working with because load in and load out, you might've seen some, it's not an easy job, but it was a real camaraderie among us. You form a bond with them because you do just the same thing than they do, but being a sister, you look at things differently than they would. You just do what they do.
- [00:07:00]

- LaVahn Hoh: So both of you had this bond with the people that you were working with. Was there a time when they would say, "Okay, can we just talk about maybe some spiritual things?"
 [00:07:30] I'm sure they just embraced you and took you in as really, as you mentioned, one of the team.
- Sister Dorothy: Yes. We call our ministry a "ministry of presence," so it is a ministry whereby we go and we live among the people. We got a job as everybody else gets a job. We have a trailer. I had to learn how to drive truck and trailer. I had to learn how to care for truck and trailer and, famously, to back it up.
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- LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.
- Sister Dorothy: Okay. We also bring, hopefully, a special presence in that in our Catholic tradition, many people will know this, we have what we call the Blessed Sacrament or the bread that we believe is Jesus Christ. So with special Vatican permission, we had the bread, the Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament in our trailer. The first 17 years, it was actually in a little room in our trailer that we called the chapel. So we don't come alone. We come with this presence of God, and we live among the people. We do the same kind of work, and I think that gives us credibility. We don't come the first day and say, "I'm sister, and we're going to have these classes, we're going to do this Bible study." We just ask the management, "Can we have a job? Can we work?" And we let it happen.
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- [00:09:00] Invariably, it has for 18 years. If we're there three, four weeks, maybe six weeks, the first one will come forward and ask, "Sister, my child needs First Communion." That's usually where we start, First Communion for the child. And I provide the instructions needed for that. When the child is instructed, I call Father Hogan. He comes and administers the Sacrament right in the circus tent usually. So it's a ministry of presence, and it happens, it really does slow ...
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- [00:10:00] Oh, when I was on Ringling as part of the prop crew, I was pulling this curtain open and closed during the show, and that was my job. I stood there, and we're in a blackened area with curtains. The next act is waiting. There's an act on the floor, there's another act waiting, and behind another curtain is another act waiting. Well, in this darkened area while they're waiting those five minutes to go onto the floor, you'd be surprised how many people came to me at that moment and said, "Sister, blah blah blah," and we'd chat, and then I said, "It's time." I open the curtain, they ran out on the floor, and they'd be back the next show to continue the story. So there's a lot of it happening unbeknownst to anybody. In the darkened area, I hardly knew who was talking to me.
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- [00:11:00] So it's instruction, it's conversation. I remember walking down a ramp into the arena and then walking out, and as I was walking out, a gentleman was sitting here. He's, "Oh, Sister, finally, you've come. I want to talk to you." I was on my way home. So it happens. We provide masses for the people. I try to get local clergy to come and say mass for the people on their schedule, confessions. We do counseling, marriage preparation. We had a wonderful ceremony one day. It was a mass. At the same mass, the couple got married, their daughter had First Communion, and their son had Confirmation, all at the same mass.
 [00:11:30]

LaVahn Hoh: Wow.

Sister: It was just wonderful, and it all happened because we're there at that time.

Dorothy:

LaVahn Hoh: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It must've been very comforting to the performers to see you pulling the rope to open the curtain before they went out. I would think that was kind a, wow, nice, solemn moment for them before they went out to do their show.

[00:12:00]

Sister: Absolutely. And there were performers who, before we came and after we left, would pray inside that little moment there. They would pray together, like the trapeze people. The dancers prayed. The dancers prayed before they went on the floor. That's not because of us. They were doing this. We had dancers who got together on the train for Bible study, and that's what happened to us these last five years. From 2012 to now, we visit a show for three months and then move on to another show. All right.

[00:12:30]

[00:13:00] What we're trying to do is empower the circus people to be lay leaders for their own traveling Christian community, so we have named lay leaders among ... We had them on the Ringling, three units. I had them on Kelly Miller and Circus Vargas. We have lay leaders assigned, and they know their lay leaders. The troop knows their lay leaders. They communicate with us the needs of the show when we're not there and so on. We're trying to empower this from within the circus because we don't have sisters anymore to do the work.

LaVahn Hoh: I'm very impressed with that you could back a truck up with a trailer on it. I couldn't even begin to do that, but I guess my question is, you weren't on the train?

[00:13:30]

Sister: That's correct. We were not on the train. We were offered in the beginning to be on the train, but we didn't much want to.

Dorothy:

LaVahn Hoh: Oh, okay.

Sister: Okay. First of all, in our lifestyle, we need our quiet time and we need our time alone.

Dorothy: We envisioned that that would not happen on the train, that more or less-

LaVahn Hoh: You're shaking your head no.

[00:14:00]

Sister: More or less, it would be 24/7 that people ... And with the trailer, they could still approach us while we're parked there. But we made a decision not to be on the train.

Dorothy:

LaVahn Hoh: This is kind of an extra question here. Did they spot your trailer at the area so you'd be close to the arenas?

Sister: They spotted us at the arenas simply because it's where the trailers were parked. In those towns where they told us we had to go to our campground because there was no space ... When there was no space, there was no space for the sisters nor for the other

[00:14:30]

trailers. Only the animal trailers there was space for. Then all of us went to a campground, we went to a campground.

LaVahn Hoh: Okay.

Sister Yeah.

Dorothy:

LaVahn Hoh: All right.

Speaker 4: Levon, maybe in a [inaudible 00:14:49]