

**CWM Audio 70-15**  
**Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Homecoming**  
**(Employee Reunion)**  
**Group Interviews, July 22, 2017**  
**Session 1**

Interview with John Dedo, Romulus Portwood Jr., Sam Drummond, and LaDonna Leyva  
 Interview conducted by Kyle Neill

- Kyle Neill: Good. All right, we're live. So, my name is Kyle Neil, conducting an interview at Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. We are interviewing former employees of the Ringling Barnum & Bailey circus. So what we're gonna do, we're just gonna start over here. I'm gonna ask you to give your name, what unit you were with, and what years you were with the circus. So, go ahead.
- [00:00:30]  
 Romulus Portwood: My name is Romulus Portwood. I was with the 119th edition as the publicist for Gunther Gabel-Williams during his farewell tour and then spent a short time doing PR work between both Blue and Red Units following that.
- Kyle Neill: Excellent.
- John Dedo: My name is John Dedo. I was initially hired as a promoter out of San Francisco and promoted both the circus and Disney On Ice shows. That started in '97, and my territory was San Francisco; Oakland; Fresno; Boise; Lexington; Louisville, Kentucky; and then I'd help out in Phoenix; Tucson; Portland; Seattle; fly to New York, 'cause that was the showing coming through California; and then headquartered in D.C., so I was gone one week, back two weeks. So it was a lot of back and forth. And then Tim Holst came to me and asked if I wanted to go onto the show side and become an assistant performance director, so I ended up doing that for the blue unit initially, '88 to '89 for [Tahar's 00:01:28] second year of his tour. And then at the end of that, just as that was concluding after Halloween, they switched me over to the Red Unit to join Gunther Gebel's second year of his farewell tour as the assistant director there. And then '90 and '92 I was the performance director for David Larible's first two-year tour on the red unit.
- [00:01:30]
- Ladonna Leyva: Ladonna Leyva, Blue Unit, 1984. I did the steak and potatoes route.
- John Dedo: Which is compared to the rodeo route?
- [00:02:00]  
 Ladonna Leyva: That's correct.
- Sam Drummond: My name is Sam Drummond from '96, South Carolina, and I was with the Blue Unit with The Greatest Show on Earth, and I was there from '81 to '85. It is the five most

[00:02:30] glorious years of my life. And I got married on 9/6/1996 in '96, 9 minutes to 6:00, so I'll never forget my anniversary, I hope. And after Ringling Brothers, there is life after Ringling Brothers. I went to England and worked over there at a small [inaudible 00:02:32] show, and I went to Japan and worked over there at a carnival plaza. And I got to see France, worked in France, Wales, and Canada. So I've seen the world through my clowning, and I love clowning, and I love you guys.

Kyle Neill: Excellent. Well, I'm gonna start asking just kind of some open-ended questions. In any particular order, you guys can feel free to jump in if you have anything to say. So starting off, what drew you into the circus? What really made you want to work at a circus?

[00:03:00]

Ladonna Leyva: I wanted to dance every day, and as being a short dancer back in the '80s, it wasn't something that was very popular, so I did the, oh, New York, California thing, cattle calls and everything, and as they looked over you and said thank you, it was kind of disappointing. So I came home from California to Detroit, and I thought that the boyfriend I left to go to California to be a star was gonna be waiting for me, and he wasn't. And I thought, "I'm getting out of here."

[00:03:30]

So the circus happened to be going through town, and they had auditions, and I auditioned and got a contract, and I left. But the bottom line is I wanted to dance every day, and I did.

[00:04:00]  
Sam Drummond: Okay. I started out performing about 10 years old doing an old man act with the suspenders, the granny glasses, and a big old earphone and telling these dumb jokes, and then we'd pass the cigar box around, and that's how I got my start. And I was always the class clown. And then I read a program about the clown college in the back of the program, and I said, "Wow, that's something I would really like to do."

[00:04:30] So I applied. In my year, there was about 4500 clowns applied, and they accepted 60. And out of those 60s, a couple of them would go to the red unit, they'd go to the blue unit and Circus World down in Orlando, Florida. And I just love entertaining and making people laugh.

John Dedo: I'll go. I didn't grow up thinking I was gonna run off and join the circus. I think I saw the circus once at the San Francisco Cow Palace when I was a kid, and another family was the one that took us along, took me along. But when ... I went to the University of Oregon and did work with the athletic department that got me interested in sports marketing, and that work was ... I just happened to be in the right place at the right time that they had this new Plaque Attack promotion, and they had this new duck costume that they were created, so I became, 1983, the original Oregon Duck mascot.

[00:05:00]

Ladonna Leyva: How cool is that?

John Dedo: Really cool. So I did that from 1983 to '85. Again, that got me entered in sports

[00:05:30] marketing. I graduated. Broadcast journalism was my undergraduate degree. And I worked in TV, applied for grad school. I went to St. Thomas University in Miami, Florida, where I got a masters in sports administration. Came back to San Francisco, and another Oregon alum friend of mine worked for an ad agency that had Ringling Brothers as a client. I also interviewed with the Oakland A's, and they had these two rookies, Canseco and McGwire, the Bash Brothers. Interviewed with them, and [00:06:00] I interviewed with Kenny Wachter with the circus, and I ran off and joined the circus. It wasn't sports entertainment, but I figured kind of like Nordstorm's in the retail business, Hyatt or Hilton in the hotel business, that Ringling Brothers was definitely a good one to get some good training in the entertainment business.

[00:06:30] So that's how I initially got started. And I was at the Cow Palace, and the group sales gal came in when I was introduced to her, and Kenny Wachter, who hired me, was about 5'6", 5'5", like me, and the group sales lady said, "Oh, well at least he meets the height requirement." Something a little reference to maybe others in the management staff and their height.

[00:07:00] And so, sidebar, so after a year, they came to me and [inaudible 00:06:45] said, "Do you want to come on to the show side?" As I mentioned earlier and because I had had some performance background, having been traveling across the country umpteen times, I ended up, I think, one of the few that did make that transition from the marketing side to the show side and [inaudible 00:07:00] been on the show side for four years. So again, it wasn't that I dreamt of it, but it was opportunities that came my way, and I'm figuring the is, you know, an opportunity that no one else can have, and I was up for it, and that's what worked out for me, and I had ... It was five great years.

Romulus  
Portwood: I also hadn't planned on running away and joining the circus, but I had a college friend that did run away and join the circus, so. And I was looking for a job, and he said, "Well, maybe you should consider being a promoter. It's a great gig." And my background in school was public relations, so I actually had submitted a resume and had gotten a phone call back from the National [inaudible 00:07:36] PR at the time, [Kathy Wales 00:07:38]. She sought me out, and in about a two-and-a-half week span between Thanksgiving and just before winter quarters and the winter marketing meetings, I had the ability to interview in California, be flown back to Washington, D.C., headquarters, and meet with Allen Bloom, Susannah Smith, Mike Franks, other members of the marketing team, and got back home and had the great opportunity to be given a chance to go on the road and promote and be a part ... Not promote, actually, be a publicist for Gunther Gebel-Williams during his farewell tour. So when they approached me, "Hey, we don't have a promoter's job, but we do have this opportunity. Would you be interested?" So it was very much a fluke, but I was in the right place at the right time, and then I got to spend the next two, two-and-a-half years traveling with The Greatest Show on Earth.

[00:08:30]  
John Dedo: And as a publicist, what does that mean you did?

Romulus But I will say, my little aside, the best of my time spent with Ringling Brothers is

Portwood: that I actually met the woman who I would marry, who was a clown with the Red Unit, and we celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary last month.

Ladonna Leyva: Wow, all right.

Sam Drummond: And what was her name?

Romulus Nicole Marsh.

Portwood:

Sam Drummond: Okay.

Romulus She actually traveled and was part of the first Gold Unit in Japan.

Portwood:

Sam Drummond: Oh, okay, I ... Off in Japan.

Romulus And then came over and was part of the farewell tour and then stayed one more year, and ...

Portwood:

Sam Drummond: Cool.

[00:09:00]

John Dedo: They divided and conquered, 'cause the clowns are having their 50th.

Sam Drummond: Uh-huh.

Romulus Anniversary of the first clown college class in November.

Portwood:

Sam Drummond: In November.

John Dedo: So he got to come to this.

Romulus I get to come to this, she gets to go to that.

Portwood:

Kyle Neill: Awesome. So I'm gonna ask you about just your first day or even first couple of days with the circus. Tell us about some of the emotions going through your minds, like how did you feel? Were you comfortable there? Was it overwhelming? Were you awestruck? Were you intimidating? Just talk about that a bit.

[00:09:30]

Romulus

Portwood:

My first day was actually down in winter quarters in [inaudible 00:09:30], and I was wet behind the ears, my first real, professional job opportunity. And when you walk into winter quarters and it's not a traditional business or professional setting in any sense of the imagination, and meeting performers, clowns who were in costume, so when you meet somebody in costume and then you see them four hours later and they're out of costume, and they've met you and know you, but you don't know who they are. There's the sights, there's the smells, there's the sounds. You learn very quickly that if you were leather-soled shoes around the tigers that the tiger urine will definitely stay with you. And I don't know if it's overwhelming, it was

[00:10:00]

just an amazing experience where everything was new and unique and it was not traditional in a business sense, but yet we were still being asked to do, at least on the management side, a professional function of how do you take care of and promote and publicize an event.

[00:10:30]

John Dedo:

My first time was, as I mentioned, at the Cow Palace when Kenny Wachter started introducing me to some of the folks, and I still wasn't quite sure I'd gotten the job or not, but as he started introducing me to people, like, "Okay, it looks like I got the job." And that one comment from the one gal. But I laugh 'cause when I talked to my mom soon after that, she goes, "Well, what was it like?" I was like, "Everyone's telling, watch your back. You gotta watch your back, watch your back." Because every time you turn around there's animals going this way or props going that way, so it was a lot of just watching your back. So that was when I was first a promoter, and then just [inaudible 00:11:06] initially went to Washington, D.C., for training, so just being able to go to headquarters. It was at that time still at New Mexico Avenue near Georgetown. Just being able to go into the headquarters and they had Gargantua ...

[00:11:00]

Romulus

Right in the lobby.

Portwood:

John Dedo:

... in the lobby, and all the sequins and posters, and just realizing, starting to take in, the history that I'd kind of now gotten myself now into. So there was those initial taking-in of that. And then when I went onto the show side, I had been around the shows and all, but I immediately, I flew into Tallahassee, and the show had just finished that day and there was a load-out, and I got into the train and didn't have anything else. And we went to, I think, Chattanooga, and got to Chattanooga. And that morning, the next morning, I opened up the vestibule door to step onto the vestibule and there was nothing there. I was like, "We lost the train." So I didn't realize that they had ... How they, depending on the train yard, they would have to divvy it up. But I was at that cut-off point. It was just, the visual of just opening a door and where there'd be a train car and train before, there was just open track coming down. So that was one of my initial thoughts of when I first ... You know, my first train run was, "We lost the train." There we were in Chattanooga.

[00:11:30]

[00:12:00]

Tag, you're it.

[00:12:30]

Ladonna Leyva:

I arrived in Venice on December 1st, 1983, and rehearsal was supposed to start December 5th, and I had no clue. I had no clue what I was in for. So I got dropped off at a train car, and it was just, "Okay, you know, that's fine." You get your key, which is this wild little key, and nothing arrived. I had no boxes. I was upset. But I was the first showgirl that arrived, so I was able to choose my roomette, as they called it.

[00:13:00]

John Dedo:

Your spacious roomette.

Ladonna Leyva:

Yes, oh, my very spacious roomette. And I chose the one that was closest to the

[00:13:30] kitchen, 'cause I figured I didn't have to pass all the other 15 rooms before I got to the kitchen. And that was my first day. I think I was just excited and happy and P.O.'d that my boxes weren't there, because I couldn't start anything. I couldn't unpack. And then I met Julie, who was the next showgirl that came, who turned out to be my best friend and who is here at this reunion, too.

Sam Drummond: Well, after 10 weeks of clown college, I went down to Venice, Florida, and I looked  
[00:14:00] at my room, which was a three-by-six-by-eight-foot tall, maybe, and I had a little sign that said, "Cubicle Suite." Cubicle, you know, and living on a mile-long circus train that we called the Silver Snail, and it was just a glorious experience. I loved it.

[00:14:30] And we had a little donikers. You know, where the restrooms, we'd call them doniker. And we had a kitchen with a little kitchenette with a little refrigerators, and we used to love to just hang out in the vestibule on train runs and look at all the backyards of America going by. And, man, I had some fun.

John Dedo: Was that your first time in clown alley?

Sam Drummond: Oh, first time in clown alley. Well, if it was your birthday, you got pied, and so they  
[00:15:00] just pied me to death on August the 8th, which is my birthday. And clown alley is pretty cool because we would keep our spirits up and our moral high by pulling jokes on each other. And, for example, like somebody would bring some doughnuts in, and we would have one white doughnut, and we'd put talcum powder all over the white doughnut, and some sucker would come up and get that last doughnut and get a mouthful of talcum powder. And then one time we were at this place in

[00:15:30] ... It was a bucket of water over this one clown's trunk, and it was my job to pull the string, and the bucket was gonna fall over his head and get him all wet. And so, unbeknownst to me, we got on hippodrome track and do the clown gags, and I come back, and I didn't know it but they had switched the bucket from his trunk over my trunk. They said, "Sam, pull the string! Pull the string!" So I pulled the string, and all the water came down on my head. So that was pretty funny. But you had to hang in there and act like it didn't bother you, 'cause if you let them know that it got to you, boy, they'd really lay it on you a little bit heavier.

[00:16:00] Ladonna Leyva: I got one other thing to say about my first day.

Sam Drummond: Yeah?

Ladonna Leyva: When I found out there weren't any showers on the train car, I just didn't know what to do. Oh, what?

Sam Drummond: I know.

Ladonna Leyva: And it wasn't 'til several days later that we found out we had to shower in the arena, and if you weren't there at 6:00 A.M. for warm water ...

Sam Drummond: Oh yeah.

Ladonna Leyva: ... then you were S.O.L.

Sam Drummond: Always cold showers.

Ladonna Leyva: Yeah.

[00:16:30]

John Dedo: And that was at rehearsals.

Ladonna Leyva: That's [inaudible 00:16:31] rehearsals at winter quarter, yeah.

John Dedo: Then when you were on the road ...

Ladonna Leyva: It was almost just as bad.

John Dedo: You had to get the arena, the bus.

Ladonna Leyva: Yeah, we had to ...

John Dedo: Schedule it.

Ladonna Leyva: Yeah.

Sam Drummond: Pay a quarter a ride to the arena on the bus.

John Dedo: You showered before you left.

Ladonna Leyva: Yeah, always showered before we left, yeah, so that you were kind of clean in the morning.

John Dedo: And it was the two-day train run?

Ladonna Leyva: Oh, lord.

John Dedo: You were fresh. Okay.

Ladonna Leyva: It's okay.

[00:17:00]

Kyle Neill: Well, you guys have already just these relationships coming out of the circus, so let's hear about some of those. Now tell us a couple of stories about some of your closest friends in the circus or dating relationships that came out of the circus, marriages, whether it was during your time when you were both working at the circus or even afterwards.

Sam Drummond: Well, we were best friends. We had a little thing called the A Team, and it was Ladonna, Julie, and [Mimi 00:17:24], and we'd go to down to [Bob Hannigan

[00:17:30] 00:17:27], his train car, and have a little party on the train run to the next town and

... So it was this one time ... Oh, we had the B Team, too, and ...

Ladonna Leyva: We didn't like the B Team, okay? [crosstalk 00:17:40] Had to be in the A Team.

Sam Drummond: [crosstalk 00:17:39] the other three girls, and so it's one girl named [Zinnette 00:17:43], and we jumped off the train, and next thing you know, the train starts moving. So I could jump back on, but poor Zinnette couldn't jump back on. So there goes the train by, and so somebody told the conductor that there's a clown and a showgirl out there. So they slowed the train down slow enough so Zinnette couldn't jump on the train, and Sam jumps on the train, and then we had to go through the working man's train car and all hooting and catcalls and stuff all the way down. But my favorite part of the train was the pie car, get those ... that meat and two vegetables and a cold glass of milk.

Ladonna Leyva: Yeah, Sam was my best friend in the clown alley, and I think that year I was the only non-clown who was allowed into clown alley, and then one time. I also met Julie ... Like I said, she was the second showgirl that showed up after me, and she was from Modesto, Beach Boys, blonde chick, and she thought I was this smoking tough girl from Detroit, and she was scared of me. And we ended up becoming like this because we've been friends for 33 years now. And we hung out. It was great. We shared lots and lots and lots of things, personal things. And me and Sam did, too.

Sam Drummond: Oh yeah.

Ladonna Leyva: So that's just my favorite ... I mean, there were other folks, too, but those were my two, Sam and Julie. Those were my two folks.

Sam Drummond: Well, they liked me because I had a '55 Chevy, and we'd drive that [crosstalk 00:19:29] ...

[00:19:30]

Ladonna Leyva: Oh, that's right. Forgot about [inaudible 00:19:31].

Sam Drummond: ... from town to town, and that was a lot of fun.

John Dedo: You'd figure out who your friends were.

I was management, so I wasn't allowed to date any of the performers. Actually, when I was a promoter they said, "Don't be dating any of the dancers or ..." And even as a promoter, we were doing the Disney On Ice shows. As promoters, we weren't supposed to date any of the ice skaters or anything like that. Of course, it happened. And then when I went on the show side, just, it comes down to there's the As and the Bs list or whatever else, but the bottom line is we're all family.

Sam Drummond: Oh yeah.

John Dedo: And then ... We were in New York City, and we were in a train, in the subway, and some guys came onto to the train car, the subway car, and were hooting and



[00:20:30] hollering, and I was taking care of one of our aerialists who was from Tennessee, Dinky, Lorelai Patterson. And she didn't want to be in New York 'cause she was a [inaudible 00:20:31] country girl, and New York City was just ... And she was traveling on her own fifth wheel. And we had to work it out that, "No, you're gonna ... We'll get your trailer at the train yard, but we will do a buddy system to get you to and from the Madison Square Garden."

[00:21:00] And so we're ... I did the buddy with her a few times. And so we're sitting there on the subway ... And actually, she's got her hands in her pockets. I'm like, "What do you got?" She's like, "Pepper spray in one and a zapper in the other." Like, "Wait, I'm here to protect you and you're better armed than I am."

[00:21:30] But these guys come on the train car. They're making a scene, and I had to have Mr. Vargas, the father of the Vargas ... Alejandro, his son, was the catcher for the trapeze act. His daughters were all part of the teeterboard act and then with the flying act. And he's solid fire hydrant guy, and his daughters were in the train car with me, and these guys. And Dinky and I, at some point we have eye contact with these guys, unfortunately, and they started to try and get us involved, and we just kind of kept our back to them. Well then our stop came up, and Mr. Vargas and I made some eye contact. I got Dinky in front of me. I followed her. One of the guys tried to reach over Mr. Vargas, and he's just got big enough that nobody could reach me as I got her out. We got his daughters out, and I'm just thinking, "Oh, I hope these guys don't come out onto the platform," because I knew I had the Hernandez teeterboards down there, I had the Chinese acrobats over there. I had ... I mean, coming out of the subway cars, and if anybody had come onto give us an issue on the platform, family.

[00:22:00]

Sam Drummond: Right.

John Dedo: And these would've been people that may have other times been jealous for this or, you know, performer, professional jealousies or whatever, that would've all set aside, and I just was picturing the headlines, as the performance director, of New Yorkers Beat Up by Circus Performers. But it didn't happen. They stayed on the train car, fortunately. But that's where it was family. Everybody took care of each other one way or the other, and that's what it was all about.

[00:22:30]  
Sam Drummond: And if you did get in trouble, you'd have to say, "Hey, Rube!" That meant "Help!"

John Dedo: Hey, Rube.

Romulus Portwood: Well, again, I have maybe a unique experience there because, as somebody that ran away and joined the circus, I would've never expected I'd meet the woman who I'd eventually marry as a result of the time spent, and that has been ... [inaudible 00:22:53] the circus has very much been a lifelong part of both of our lives because of that experience. It's something we share and cherish.

[00:23:00] But I think as John suggested, the family aspect ... The interesting thing is that there

[00:23:30] are people that we were on the road together with 30 years ago, some of which were still on the road up until the very end, a few months ago, and any time the circus would come through town, if you would have the opportunity to go, you'd go. But because my wife is a clown, we did free rolls. So we had the benefit of being able to see future generations of performers and be able to host them and have them come visit and be part of our family. Steve, who performs here at Circus World, has been to my house in California when I lived there. I live in Massachusetts now. But I travel for work.

[00:24:00] I am still in contact with a number of people that were on the road. Just being here and even this week and being able to recount stories with people that you didn't necessarily know, but the fact that we all have worked for Ringling, this is a different kind of a reunion because that experience of what we did is so unique and one-of-a-kind that it doesn't make any difference whether or not you were a performer, management, animal crew, whatever you did, what is it that you did, and then there's stories that come out of that and then the shared experience of being a part of the Ringling family that makes this such a different kind of an experience, I think, for all of us.

Sam Drummond: Tell them about a free roll, what that means.

Romulus Portwood: So a free roll is ... So free roll is when you lay out a spread, basically, food, snacks, drinks, whatever, and then you invite the clowns. And so ...

[00:24:30] John Dedo: The local clowns, in that community, that town, would host it, correct?

Romulus Portwood: Yes.

John Dedo: And they come to clown alley on the specific [inaudible 00:24:35].

Romulus Portwood: So now, I mean, it's ... It's typically it's sometimes coming to the clowns and bringing it, because they can't always get all of them out. And it's changed over the years because there used to be a larger group of clowns. Clown alley used to be a sizeable ...

Sam Drummond: Yeah, 25 clowns, yeah.

Romulus Portwood: [00:25:00] You know, it had ... The clowns had impact in the show and beyond. And again, as Gunther's publicist, he wasn't able to do everything, and kind of number two on my list was a great working relationship with 26 clowns that we had on the 118th edition, so.

John Dedo: The other part of it, too, is people have their regular jobs in the regular world, and at the end of the day you go home, and you got your family, you got your other life. And within the circus traveling unit ...

Romulus You go home.

Portwood:  
 John Dedo: You go home, and it's with the same people. And so you work together. You eat together. You party together. We had some of the best barbecues, especially in the great weather, in the nice summer to spring dates. You could just walk up and down that train run, line, and be ... It was food everywhere, barbecues going everywhere. And everybody was welcome. It was ... And because at the end of the day also is [inaudible 00:25:47] the next day you're going back at it, and not only are you friends but you're also relying on each other for your safety, whether it's the train safety on the train run or doing the rigging right, 'cause the riggers are doing it or your spotters, that it was a matter of you trusted each other and ...

[00:25:30]

[00:26:00]

Romulus [inaudible 00:26:01] the animals.  
 Portwood:  
 John Dedo: Taking care of the animals. That you had to trust each other, and not always agree with each, and it wasn't always pretty 'cause it was family. And we always joke about it, As the Circus Turns, 'cause there was drama. There was dating and then ...

Romulus Not breakups.  
 Portwood:  
 John Dedo: And married ... And, yeah, so there's a lot of them. So it was life.

Ladonna Leyva: What year was this again?

John Dedo: I was '87 to '92.

[00:26:30]

Ladonna Leyva: Okay, so you experienced the same thing I did and the same as Sam. This was pre-CD, pre-cellphone. This was era of cassette.

John Dedo: Cellphones were a brick.

Ladonna Leyva: Yeah. When you wanted to go to somebody's room, you would have to throw rocks to see if they were home on their train car. You couldn't call them. It was really wild. And the other thing I found was really crazy is all the train yards that we would ever park in, they were never in the greatest part of town.

[00:27:00]

Sam Drummond: They sure wasn't.

John Dedo: Except [inaudible 00:27:05] Falls.

Ladonna Leyva: And there was always a place to eat and it was a bar. That's all it said was "Bar," or there was a restaurant, and it said "Food." That's all it said.

Romulus Wait, circus people drink?  
 Portwood:  
 Ladonna Leyva: Oh, no, circus people do not drink. But I found that very interesting. Now I'm sure it's very different with communication so quick. We didn't have that. We still knew what a busy signal was. But we didn't have any phones, so we had to go to the

[00:27:30]

payphone.

Sam Drummond: But another thing, any performers, first year on the road, they're a First of May. And I was a First of May, and we give all the First of Mays names, and my name was Country Ham Sam, being from the South, so that's what I was stuck with. I love country ham.

[00:28:00]

Kyle Neill: So we only have a handful of minutes left with this interview, so I'm gonna wrap up with kind of a broader question here, which each of you can take a turn answering for yourself. But with this interview, you are documenting a part of Ringling's history, so what is it that you really want people to know about Ringling and the circus?

John Dedo: One hour's not enough time for us, any one of us, to share, let alone share it with four other people, 'cause whether it's one year, four years, the stories, memories, it was a lot. I'll come back and let somebody else jump in, but I just need more time. And you're welcome to call me.

[00:28:30]

Sam Drummond: And I never saw the animals abused all my five years on the road. We took good care of our animals because they had to perform just as much as we did. So, you know, it was a great time, and I'll miss it.

[00:29:00]

Ladonna Leyva: I agree with ...

John Dedo: John.

Ladonna Leyva: ... John. There isn't enough time, although what I have found over the years is that it's really difficult to share with a non-circus employee your experience because nobody would understand. I like to compare it to the military, only because you're with the same people. We'd be like a platoon. You're all going to the same place. You have your own lingo that only you know, what a doniker is, what a pie car is, what a ring curb is, the front track, the back track, everything, the manage, spec. Nobody knows that stuff.

[00:29:30]

John Dedo: Varichari. Varichari.

Ladonna Leyva: Charivari.

Sam Drummond: Charivari.

[00:30:00]

John Dedo: See, I can't even ... I still don't get it right!

Ladonna Leyva: Or teeterboard. Nobody knows that, and so when you would begin ... When you're thrown back into regular, normal world, there's no ... To me, this is my thing that is in my heart that nobody will ever, ever know, and I would do it again in a second,

- [00:30:30] and I would tell somebody, " If you could do it, I would do it again, too." Unfortunately, Sam's phone's ringing.
- Sam Drummond: Excuse me. It's my wife. Okay, I'll call you in a minute. I'm doing an interview. Bye.
- Ladonna Leyva: So that's what I would ... That's what I took with me. It's ... I'll never forget it. It will never go away. I'll take it with me as long as I live, and I am really, really thankful and glad that I did it.
- [00:31:00]  
Sam Drummond: That was my wife, Kay, so I better give her some shout out. I'm sorry, my nose is running. I got it. Okay.
- John Dedo: Runny nose. I hate having a runny nose.
- [00:31:30] Real quick, charivari that we referenced, I'm not sure you're aware what that is. I sure wasn't aware what it was. But I was in rehearsals, and the performance director who would've been knowledgeable was off property 'cause his wife was having difficulties with a pregnancy, so I was now helping coordinate the rehearsals, and one of the things that the clowns were going to be doing was the charivari. And so I'm sitting there typing up on a typewriter, 'cause computers weren't around quite at that point, there was starting to come. But I'm typing up the spec and what act is going to be following whatever, and I did "cherry very," C-H-E-R-R-Y V-E-R-Y. And we went into our first production meeting, and everybody coming down, coming down, and then "cherry very," and that's when I realized ...
- [00:32:00] Everyone's just busting up, and that was my First of May moment three years into being on the road, 'cause I'd done the rodeo route two years in a row, which is typically the second year of the tour. But charivari is actually C-H-A-R-I-V-A-R-I because it's a french word, and it ... The chariveri was a routine where the clowns would ...
- Sam Drummond: Mini tramp, and jump over the wall and do flips and stuff.
- John Dedo: Over a wall or some other prop and do tumbling in sequence, one right behind the other.
- [00:32:30]  
Sam Drummond: Not to be confused with cherry pie, which was extra work that you didn't get paid for [inaudible 00:32:32].
- John Dedo: That's right. [inaudible 00:32:32]. So that's chariveri.
- [00:33:00] I think going back to just it's the general sense that it's a different life, different world that people love to hear the stories, but they're still not kind of understand the life and the role that we all had. The opportunities that we had to see parts of the country that I otherwise wouldn't have, family and friends that I wouldn't have otherwise seen, but the same point there was other opportunities I did miss because I was on the road 11-and-a-half months out of the year, but I wouldn't

change it for the world.

Sam Drummond: I did 2500 performances and missed two, and they were both in Washington, D.C., my first year and my fifth year. So that '55 Chevy was just slow getting to Washington after coming from Virginia, so that's why I was late. Missed the trolley [inaudible 00:33:22]. The tiger trainer.

Romulus Portwood: [00:33:30] Yeah, it's just ... I think everybody's talking about that the unique experience of having been on the road and doing something that really very few other people have done. I know in my experience having an opportunity to represent Gunther Gebel-Williams during his farewell tour, I grew up watching Gunther, so I knew who he was. The fact that I got to be with him literally every day in some very intimate moments because we had to deal with a number of things. He was the primary of the star of the show at the time, he was being asked to do PR, press conferences, [00:34:00] advance work with the other shows that were coming in, so his day was very much not his own and he was literally, legitimately the hardest-working guy on the show, 'cause he did get up in the morning and he dealt with his animals. He was there for every performance, and during the farewell tour he was on the show floor about 45 minutes out of every two-and-a-half-hour show, which is more than any other actor or performer.

[00:34:30] The responsibilities that he had as part of the management to see that he was putting the show first and being accessible to media, print, electronic, television, radio. It was a tall order, and I think ... I would love people to know just how dedicated he was to making that show a success. He did give everything to make the circus a success here in the United States. He was tireless. He cared for his animals. The love that he had for the animals was evident every day, the way he cared for them, the way he spent time with them. He did have mastery of them, but not through intimidation. It was definitely through mutual respect. He touched a lot of people, and a lot of people have lifetimes of memories of going to the circus because they saw him do something special in the center ring, so.

[00:35:30] John Dedo: Yep. When you're doing 2000 shows, it gets to be a grind, and there is ... You're doing two shows Friday, three shows Saturday, two or three shows [crosstalk 00:35:41]

Sam Drummond: Six-pack.

Romulus Portwood: Six-packs.

Sam Drummond: Nine-packs sometimes.

John Dedo: And you're sitting there grinding it. And even then, I'm not a performer, but I'd sit there and I'd be getting kind of down and out, but you look into the crowd and you see the smiles on the kids and the parents and the adults, children of all ages. You see the smiles and you realize, "Okay, that's what I'm doing it for," and you just get that energy back and make it work. And with Gunther and the animals also, when [00:36:00]

he did retire, he still stuck around [inaudible 00:36:05]. His son and his daughter were still performing, and ... But he was also in charge of animals on the other unit as well, and they brought him in ... He had never missed a show, and you can help fill in any of those numbers. Broken legs, still performed or whatever.

[00:36:30] But he went for ... to the blue unit to do some stuff, and he'd never really never been away for too long, if ever. And he'd been away a couple days, and I just happened to be in the backstage tour with the group, and we were inside the elephant tent. And I knew that Gunther was due back about that time, but I wasn't really clued into that. But as we're in the tent, the elephants on one end started stirring and moving and making some noises, and it just kind of went down the line, and they were all at one point getting a little agitated. But it wasn't a negative agitated, it was just like, "Wait, what's going on here?" And then I heard his voice, and then he came through the tent. They had already knew, sensed, that he was on property, and they were getting excited, and that to me is just like ... [inaudible 00:37:06] and I was just chills up in the back just to think that that's the sense, the aura, that he provided in those animals. People obviously have their negativity on it, but they're performers, and just as whether it's David Letterman's Stupid Pet Tricks, dogs, cats to elephants, they're loved. And that was an awesome experience.

Sam Drummond: [00:37:30] Speaking of elephants, I tell you the clowns were envious of elephants because we'd be out there trying to get the laughs, and all of a sudden the elephant just had to do his business and he'd get ... The house would just roar. They thought that was the funniest thing, so.

John Dedo: Miguel Vazquez.

Romulus Vargas.

Portwood:

John Dedo: Vazquez, Miguel Vazquez. Quadruple summersault.

Romulus Oh yeah.

Portwood:

Ladonna Leyva: Oh, with the blindfold that he could see through.

John Dedo: Well, there was ...

Ladonna Leyva: I'm sorry.

John Dedo: [inaudible 00:37:51] that part, too, but the quadruple summersault was the first time ...

Ladonna Leyva: Sorry, that was a secret.

[00:38:00]

John Dedo: Well, anyway. So, but with the quadruple summersault, it was the first time it had been done in circus history, and it was amazing to see that happen, especially for

[00:38:30] those that were within the circus world, industry. To the public, though, what was interesting was at the end of the trapeze acts a lot of the performers would go down in the net and then go back up and get back onto the bar. And then they'd go back down and go back up onto the bar. And they would get a bigger applause for doing that than this guy who had done the first thing ever in Ringling history. I'm doing a quadruple summersault. So that was always a funny thing.

[00:39:00] There was also the reality that we were dealing with people from other countries. And there was a point, I was there when the Chinese ... We had the Chinese acrobats, and the way that the Chinese ... 'Cause circus is a two-year tour, and when we brought in the Chinese acrobats, they worked it out on eight-month tours. There would be three different groups that would come in from China and do their three rings and do all these different performances and stuff. And we had this one act that was with us when the Tiananmen Square in China, the riot, was going on. And so obviously they're very concerned, 'cause they have families. There's not sure what going on with China.

Romulus Portwood: How about the [inaudible 00:39:13] when the wall came down. We have Eastern Europeans when the wall comes down.

John Dedo: And Russia. Yep, so it's safe to ... Yeah. So, and soon, about that same time, we're switching out for the new troupe to come in from China, and I get the ... A, "Dedo, I need you to take the troupe to New York," or Boston, wherever it was, "get them on the plane, and then this other group's coming in, and get them back to the show."

[00:40:00] I'm like, okay, great, I'm taking eight dudes and telling them they're going back to the country that they're not sure what kind of country they're going back to. And I said, "Okay, cool. What if they decide they don't want to go?" And it was like, "Make sure they go."

Ladonna Leyva: Didn't a few of them defect, though?

John Dedo: Well, that was a whole other story. But that group, they did go back and it was all good. Two ... For David Larible's tour was another time we had Chinese acrobats. And, yes, the first group, we had a few defect. And then the next tour came through, we had about five or six defect. And then by the third group we had two defect within the first 24 hours. And it was kind of like one every couple weeks, and by the end of that eight months we were down to about 11 or 12 Chinese acrobats, but as part of the parades, they were filling in on spots on floats in other areas, so I'm ... My girlfriend at the time was the right height and size to fill in one of the spots of one of the gals, so she was up on one of the floats. And at the same time as I understand Tim Holst, who was the producer and was out traveling the world for new talent, was in China at one of the points where we were starting to lose a number of the Chinese to defection, and my understanding is the Chinese government was saying, "You're not leaving this country until you find all these ..."

[00:41:00] So I'm not sure of all the politics and things that went behind that, but again, that



was realities that we're dealing with. We're just here to put on a show. No! We are living and working with people that are from other countries and the cultures. And I grew up in San Francisco, so for me, being around culture was no problem. But being able to be with Hungarians, Bulgarians, Russians, Chinese, and here none of us spoke the same language. Spanish got through us through a bunch. A lot of ...

[00:41:30]

Romulus Portwood:  
John Dedo: You spoke circus, though.  
You spoke circus and you'd sign language at different times, and you did what you'd do to get the show must go on.

Sam Drummond: And can I say that this gal was vaccinated with a phonograph needle. Okay, I'm sorry.

Ladonna Leyva: Did you ride on a train?

[00:42:00]

John Dedo: I did. Usually, except when I wanted to go play golf.

Ladonna Leyva: I only ask that because one of my favorite ...

Sam Drummond: Something on the lens. I got it, okay?

Ladonna Leyva: One of my favorite things about ... or one of the things that I thought was the coolest is that on a run, a train run, let's say from New York to Oklahoma, which is a good three-day run, you had to have your car doors open. Everything had to be open so that people could walk from one end of the train to the other and also to get to the pie car. And the coolest thing was, for me, is the smells of the food. So you'd go through the Polish car and the Hungarian and the Bulgarian car, and there was always these great smells of food happening. That was really great. I just really thought that was cool. It was cool. And it was the same thing, people from around the world.

[00:42:30]

Romulus Portwood:  
Ladonna Leyva: Speaking of great smells, smelling the elephants here at Circus World is ...  
It just brings back all kinds of memories you never forget.

[00:43:00]

Romulus Portwood:  
Sam Drummond: It's a scent that you don't ... That is a ... You'll never smell that anyplace else.  
But not the tigers. Whoo!

Romulus Portwood:  
Ladonna Leyva: Whoo, no thank you.  
And you get used to it.

Sam Drummond: They're meat-eaters, yeah.

John Dedo: You learn real quick if you're near the tiger cages and if you saw a tail go up, they were very accurate within 15 feet of spray, and that was not a pretty smell to have on your costume or wardrobe. No, not a good one.

Kyle Neill:  
[00:43:30] Well, on that awesome note we're gonna have to end this interview. Thank you very much for giving some of your time today. I know just a short interview, and I know you guys could go on all day, all year, just talking about your awesome experiences with the circus, but thank you very much for giving us your oral histories.

Ladonna Leyva: Thanks for having us.

John Dedo: Thanks for having-