

CWM Audio 70-16
Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Homecoming
(Employee Reunion)
Group Interviews, July 22, 2017
Session 2

Interview with Sarah Chapman, Nathan Slabaugh, Donna MacDonald, JoAnn Lomoriello Galasso, Francoise Edwards, Melanie Montana, Mike Melssen and Jeremy Papay
 Interview conducted by Kyle Neill

- Kyle Neill: So, my name is Kyle Neill. We're here at Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin conducting oral history interviews, documenting Ringling Barnum and Bailey.
- So, what we're going to do we're going to start off, we'll start off with you Donna. We're just going to go one at a time all the way around. I'm going to ask you your name, what unit you were with and the years that you were with the circus. So, go ahead.
- [00:00:30]
 Donna: Hi. I'm Donna [inaudible 00:00:29] McDonald, I was here 95 to 99 and I was on the Red Unit.
- Sarah : Alright.
- Hi, I'm Sarah Chapman. I was on the Ringling Blue 69, 70 and Ringling Red 71 to 74. I was a featured aerialist and a show girl.
- Nathan:
 [00:01:00] Hi, I'm Nathan Slabaugh, I was the lead trumpet player on the Gold Unit from 2005 until 2011, so gold 1 through 4.
- Jeremy: Jeremy Papay, not spelled that way, but it's pronounced that way ... Drums on Gold from 2008 right up to the bitter end, I'm from Pittsburgh, PA.
- Mike: Hi, my name is Mike Melssen and I spent the majority of my 15 years on the Blue Unit of Ringling in various capacities, pay master, purchasing agent, assistant AGM, and the last 7 years as the general manager on the Blue Unit.
- [00:01:30]
 Frenchy: Hi, I'm Francoise Edwards, otherwise known as Frenchy and I did 5 years collectively between 1990 and 1998. I was dancer and a clown and road King Tusk and it was pretty awesome.
- JoAnn: Hi, I'm JoAnn Lomoriello Galasso, I'm from New York City and I was on the Blue Unit in 1978 as a show girl.

[00:02:00]

Melanie: My name is Melanie Montana, I was in Ringling Brother's Circus in 1978 with JoAnn. I am from Woodburning, New Jersey, we were on the Blue Unit and I was with that unit for one year.

Kyle Neill:

Awesome, now we're going to kind of open it up to some broader questions. Feel free to turn it in to a conversation. So, I want to ask you guys what drew you in to the circus, why did you want to work in the circus?

[00:02:30]

Jeremy:

Well I know at least for me, you know musician, like that was always- you knew that was one of the hardest gigs, one of the hardest working bands in the country. I saw the circus as a kid a whole bunch and then through whatever teenage amnesia kind of forgot about its existence until I got a phone call from Robby Redding on the gold where a drummer was leaving the tour and the base player I had gone to college with was still on the tour, dropped my name and you know a two week whirl wind later after I agreed to it and figured out what an RV was and bought a 5th wheel and I left Pittsburgh and had to drive to Arizona to meet up with the show. It was the best, yeah definitely the best 7 and half years that I've ever experienced.

[00:03:00]

Mike:

I actually grew up not all that far from here in [inaudible 00:03:12] Iowa. Ringling never even played our home town, but I mean I had seen all the movies and read all the books, I know The Greatest Show on Earth, that film. It was just kind of something that caught my eye and an itch I thought I should scratch, and looked into it and said I wanted to work and do it and travel for a year just to say that I'd done it and get it out of my system, but it got into my system and one year led to another and positions changed and I grew to love it so.

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Donna:

As a dancer I didn't really think about the circus, oh I want to join the circus, I was just in New York auditioning for everything and this was just another audition and then they said well come see the show tonight and see if you want to be in the show, so I went to the show, I said oh, without a doubt I want to be in the show. It was just incredible, I didn't know where to look and I was completely overwhelmed, I loved it, that was it.

[00:04:00]

Melanie:

I personally did it on a dare. I was in my first year at the Philadelphia Dance Academy at that time before it merged with the College of Performing Arts in Philadelphia and we were in ballet class and I remember one of my co-students, his name was Tim, we were sitting on the floor looking at a newspaper that was called The Backstage, I had no idea what that even was, but that listed all the auditions, you know I was 19 I didn't know, I didn't know anything. So, he was laughing and he was pointing at that audition and he said "You would be so good for that", and I remember looking and thinking I'm going to go. It was the next day in Madison Square Garden, New York City could have been 3,000 miles away.

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I'd never been to New York, but I got on a Trailways bus, headed up there, dressed

nicely, got off the bus and I'm going "Do you know where Madison Square Garden is?", and he was like "Right there", and I got the job that day, I went home and I was dressed a little bit nicer, this was in the 70's you know when you wore ragged jeans, but I was dressed kind of nice.

[00:05:30] My mom goes "Where did you go today?", and I said "Oh, I joined the circus", and she laughed you know, and she goes "Really, where did you go today?", and I said "I joined the circus", and she laughed again, but not as hard and then she goes "Come on, where did you go today?", and I said "Mom, I joined the circus", and her delight went to horror and she was still thinking it was like you know a side show, so she was like oh, and she didn't talk to me for months.

Yeah, so that was how it all happened for me on a dare and I did it.

[00:06:00]

JoAnn:

I only went to the circus once as a child, had to be at Madison Square Garden because I was born and raised in the Bronx and my mom wanted to buy something for each of us and the only thing I wanted was the show girl on the stick. It was a stick with a showgirl that twirled around when you went like this, that was all I wanted, but I had no intentions of ever becoming a showgirl in the circus.

[00:06:30]

I went to the famous high school performing arts and majored in classical ballet and like Donna, you know starting going to auditions in my early 20's and what not. Then I had got a regular job in Rockefeller Center and I was at work and my best friend called and said "Oh Jo, I just saw the newspaper, they're holding auditions at Madison Square Garden for showgirls, you have to go", and I was like "Whoa, I work a regular office job, I can't do this", she was like "No, no, no, you have to go", so I asked my boss at the time could I have an extra hour for lunch, brought my little dance bag with me. I didn't tell anybody in the office what I was doing.

[00:07:00]

Headed from Rockefeller Center down to Madison Square Garden and auditioned, did not find out that day, we must have been at the same audition, we think. I waited, I don't remember how many months, but in June of 1977 I received my letter and I ran away and joined the circus. [inaudible 00:07:20]

Frenchy:

[00:07:30]

Well I had gone to the American Musical and Dramatic Academy and one of our substitute dance teachers was a former showgirl, Inga Peterson, and after I graduated and started auditioning, after doing children's theater. It was my second audition and I too, saw the add and I actually snubbed it at first. In the morning I was like well I'm going to go visit a- I think it was West Side Story for some little stock theater or something and it was very exhausting and by the time it was time for the last bit [inaudible 00:07:55], I was so exhausted from this audition and I didn't feel at my best at it. So, I was so tired, but then I saw the add and I'm like, I'm just going to go because it was the same day and so I showed up and one other girl showed up, Lisa Gear, and we're life long friends, but we waited out there.

[00:08:00]

There was this guy that wouldn't let us in and then one of the clowns came and said "Hey, are you coming to the clown auditions?", and we're like "No, dancer", and they're like "Dancer, who wants to be a dancer?", but then they got us in a

[00:08:30] little bit earlier than this guy that was trying to block us out from Madison Square Garden. It was a big audition, it's the largest place that I've seen dancer auditions. We got to a lot of towns to audition and usually one or two girls show up, but it was like 50-60 girls and then the two that I got to know at the time and myself were picked out by the dance captain there and so we were on the road in like the next couple months all together.

[00:09:00] So, that's how it happened and Inga Peterson said "Oh, you know what? You'll meet lots of people, you love animals", and I am an animal lover, I mean people always found me hugging on the elephants in the back and so while they're all socializing over here I'm just like hmm, kissing the little tiger nose in the cage when we were allowed to, you never knew that. He was my performance director and I never told him back then, but now you know.

Mike: Shame on you.

[00:09:30] Sarah : Okay, my turn. I was born in Sarasota, Florida so circus came very easy for me. I was in the Sara Circus for five years, I started when I was 12. When I was 14 a family friend came to our home and said "You have the talent and the ability to support yourself one day doing an act if you're interested", "Oh, I'm interested". I didn't want to ride horses ... Jump on and off of their backs, well if you want to do trapeze and said okay, so over the next three years in high school I practiced on a balancing bar, trapezes. I picked the hardest trapezes you could possibly learn to do and because it takes balance, which is developing the muscles in your feet and I did that my senior year in high school.

[00:10:00] Went off to college, I failed half my classes, all the humanities, so I wasn't a good student. Circus was easy for me, it kept me in shape and that was important to me. I had gained weight at college and I went back to practicing on my single trap and my balancing bar and along came a job offer to work at the Circus Hall of Fame, which is like a theme park kind of like Circus World, but it was in Sarasota, Florida. I took the job at \$50 a week, I wore white face makeup, I was a college student at the time to earn my AA degree and I'd go to my class in the morning, it was a makeup class of course, one of the one's that I failed and I'd rush to the Circus Hall of Fame and I'd go in the front entrance and pat the two hemispheres wagon, say some kind of special words to it, go put my clown makeup on and work for the summer.

[00:10:30] At the end of that summer I was 19 years old and I married Danny Chapman who was 52. I thought he would help to get me on the Ed Sullivan show because they put acts on there once a week. That never happened. I got to meet Ed Sullivan and [inaudible 00:11:26] and a lot of other people in Madison Square Garden, but Danny Chapman was not a good manager for my act. Getting on the Ringling show, which you've all talked about, since I was many circuses, it's the epitome, it's the show to be one. At that time in the circus world if you were on the Ringling show, that's top stuff, top billing. So, we landed on the Ringling show coming in through clown college, which was in 1968, the first clown college.

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[00:11:30]

[00:12:00]

[00:12:30] Then, oh it's a long story in there, but there I was technically contracted to be a showgirl and do my future aerial act. Now talk about auditions, my audition was done on the [Phillipy inaudible 00:12:19] creek in Sarasota, Florida on a hot sticky day just like this. Two limousines pulled up and they were air conditioned and out of those limousines came Allen Bloom, Irvin Feld, Richard Barstow, and two other people that day. There were a lot of live oak trees and it's cool underneath the trees. Each one of the men went to a different tree, like these posts here, and stood there. We didn't offer them ice water. I decided to do my balancing bar first, held from a live oak tree, and I did my balancing routine, which was about 6 minutes long and then I got off of that and I changed into my red leotard with under tights and fish nets. We had a 20ft rigging with a single swinging trap in it. I auditioned for both of them and I came off, I was sweating, I was pouring with perspiration and I kind of bounced to the ground. Allen Bloom came up to me and said, "Are you always this hot when you finish?", and I'm huffing and puffing like an athlete and I said "It's a very humid day", and I excused myself to go put on some shorts and that was it.

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[00:14:00] They got in their air conditioned cars and they left and I went up to Danny and I said, "Well, what did they say?", they just didn't say anything, they just left, but he already knew what he was going to do. Then during rehearsals the Red Unit went out, they were the first to leave on January 1st, the Blue Unit started rehearsals and we thought [inaudible 00:14:03] about three weeks of rehearsals and Danny came to me again and said "Sarah you have to audition again", I said "Are you kidding me?", are you kidding? So, in that back area where when you went out to the back yard they put up my bouncing bar and they put up my swinging trap, I wore the same red leotard, I didn't perspire because the building's freezing at that time of year and everything went fine except this time I was auditioning in front of all the performers, just what those people had to do last night. A show for performers in front of performers and I was relatively unknown at that time, I had had some experience, though I was a new first time anywhere and program, but I went through that audition and that's how I got on the Ringling show.

Jeremy: That's a great- that's great.

Frenchy: That's fantastic, wow.

JoAnn: What a story.

Frenchy: That is deep.

[00:15:00] Sarah: I enjoy hearing all of your stories, after the circus I retired early from Fibromyalgia. I finished my education, took my 29 years to get a degree and I didn't go back for a master's degree. Some where along the way I wrote stories, I've always like to write. So, I wrote a cookbook and that's a fun book with anecdotes, and a lot of people have this book. It's called The Circus Girl's cookbook because we always lived in our trailer, I did not go on the train. People would come to eat in this, all

[00:15:30]

over the United States we've had people that would come and eat it with the Chapman's. Then later on I wanted to tell the real story, not the family story, what was really going on, so I wrote a memoir and it told my story. Many people have this book also, so the stories I'll tell today the majority of them are in here.

[00:16:00]

Kyle Neill:

Awesome, well let's get in to those. I want to ask you about your first day, your first couple of days with the circus, what kind of emotions were you going through? How did you feel? Were you comfortable in the environment? Were you overwhelmed? Were you awe struck? Maybe you were intimidated. Talk about that.

Donna:

I'm thinking all of the above.

Melanie:

I just remember arriving at the airport, right? We were picked up, what was her name? Costella.

JoAnn:

Concello.

Sarah :

Antoinette.

Melanie:

Antoinette.

JoAnn:

Antoinette.

Sarah :

Concello.

Mike:

Concello, yeah right.

[00:16:30]

JoAnn:

She retired from the [inaudible 00:16:33].

Melanie:

She picked us up and took us to the train, am I right? And when we pulled up to the train, you're all excited and you looked at the train and you were like-

JoAnn:

Oh my god.

Melanie:

This is where we're going to be staying?

JoAnn:

This is where we're-

Melanie:

JoAnn's room had a toilet in it, like not one that you used.

JoAnn:

No, an old dirty-

Melanie:

An old beat up toilet.

[00:17:00]

JoAnn: Toilet was in the closet and I guess that was the bathroom at one time.

Melanie: I guess.

JoAnn: It was 5x7 and eventually it had bunk beds in it. A 5x7 room, Bernice Collins was my roommate, she was the first black female clown that Ringling ever hired, so Ebony magazine and everybody was all over her that year. We're still friends today. We were roommates the whole year, we had a 2x3 walking space. What we packed in to that room was incredible, but when I first got there the room was an absolute disaster. The bed was only connected to the wall, but the rest of it was down on the floor. I was like, I know this is the circus, but how do you sleep in that and it was awful. I tell people now, I came from a suburban home in the Bronx in New York City where I water skied and you know played and what not. I wasn't used to like a lot of roaches and stuff like that, every morning I would wake up, pull the sheets back and flick the dead roaches off the bed-

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[00:18:00]

Melanie: Ugh, at least they died.

JoAnn: Like this and then I rolled over and I would make my bed, and I'm like so germ conscious today, but then I would just do that, make my bed and that was it. I had a Bulgarian family come in and build this great unit that was a bed at night and the center of it pulled up in the day time and the two ends were trunks where we could store stuff with pillows and the middle part that came out are our table and our benches, it was great.

[00:18:30]

Sarah : And what city did you join in?

JoAnn: New York.

Sarah : In New York,

JoAnn: Well we flew to Venice to put the show together and after that [inaudible 00:18:55].

Sarah : So, when you saw the train it was in Venice.

JoAnn: Yeah.

[00:19:00]

Sarah : Oh, well we haven't got to the building yet. You have to tell them what you thought of the building.

JoAnn: The building where we put the show together?

Sarah : The rehearsal building.

JoAnn: It was a little different than New York City.

Mike: It could be very cold or it could be very hot. There were some days that rehearsals even in December could be very hot.

Sarah : Sticky.

Mike: Yes.

Sarah : Before we get wet.

Mike: Yes, yes, yes.

Sarah : [crosstalk 00:19:23] The girl's dressing room was upstairs, up a flight of wooden stairs.

[00:19:30]

Mike: Right, right. And one side was the wardrobe area and the other side was the clown alley and it was a small little arena that if they knew they could fill the show and structure it in a way if it could work in that building it could work in any arena across the country. So, and when the show was produced it was, you know kept in mind that you wanted to do the same performance consistently as often as you could, so you know the same show you gave in Madison Square Garden is what you did in Abilene, Texas or some smaller venue.

[00:20:00]

Yeah.

Sarah : [inaudible 00:20:07] South Dakota.

JoAnn: Oh my god, Oklahoma City was-

Melanie: Oh, it was hot.

Mike: But my first days, I started for short stint on the marketing side, but it was one of these deals where I had an interview in the main offices in Washington, DC and then they said okay, how soon can you be in Denver? And it was like turn the car around, stop back in Iowa, pick up some more clothes and go to Denver. But it was like okay, I'm here and it's all happening. I mean little did I think when I started out in the marketing department that I would be on the unit and the eventually be the general manager some day. So, the business itself takes a lot of different little left turns that you don't often expect, so.

[00:20:30]

Jeremy: Just like the 2,200 mile drive that I never- I was a rock musician, you know I've done like little tours in bands with a bunch of other smelly dudes going you know to cities close by, but getting the gig and then having to be a poor musician already and then part of the deal on gold was you bought your trailer and your truck or whatever you were going to make, but pulling out like the first time I drove the thing was Pittsburgh to Arizona, like where I had a video of the show to kind of learn in my head. I got there and I'm like wait, I'm here, what I'm used to, when's rehearsal, when are we doing this, and I kind of got laughed at a little bit, like no

[00:21:00]

[00:21:30] you can watch the show tonight and then tomorrow you're on, don't screw up.

I'm like well, I'm here with this rig across the country, I guess I should probably try to play well. I guess I did well enough, but it was just different than anything I had ever done before, but instantly fell in love with it, like you know I had [inaudible 00:21:47] I was planning on staying another 5 or 6 years on top of the 7 and half, but I was [inaudible 00:21:54].

[00:22:00]

Nathan: Yeah, I had a similar thing being in gold like we didn't have the train, so I've never been on a train run, but I've driven 150-200 thousand across the country, personally between towns and it's interesting because it changes the pace from when on a train run you go train yard to train yard. Whereas for us, we would stop and there'd be- you know usually in the summer you'd blow out a couple tires just because driving across Texas in the heat you blow out tires and hope that it doesn't take anything else with it.

Jeremy: It took out the propane line one time, didn't it?

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Nathan: Yeah, it took out my propane line out of the refrigerator. But my first, so you know I auditioned over the phone like basically had a list of phone numbers and I guess the circus kind of found me because I was called in for like cruise ships, whatever and I got a call back from David Killinger and they faxed me the music, auditioned over the phone and like two days later they were like yeah, so you got the gig. So, shopped for a RV and bought a motorcycle, put on the back of the RV and drove from Virginia out to Montana ... Great Falls, Montana.

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[crosstalk 00:23:01]

Same thing, I had the book and I had listened to the show on the way out, but I was like oh, am I going to get to watch the guy performing and he's like no, no, we're just going to rehearse it this morning and then you're on tonight, so. And I just remember that first like- at that time the band sat on top of the portal and used the portal from cloudscape and- or Gold 1 and just like the opening where the pyros going off, the showgirls are walking up across the stage because they had stairs you know coming down from the bandstand and it was just like a deer in the headlights look, very surreal moment that I'll never forget the rest of my life, you know. It's just like I'm in this and there were a lot of trials and tribulations of just like adjusting to RV living. I didn't have the cockroaches, thankfully, but I did- my toilet overflowed because in the middle of winter in some little town in Iowa and the [inaudible 00:23:56] lent me a shop vac to shop vac out my bathroom because the toilet had overflowed. Yeah, a lot of adjustment, but after 6 and half years you watched the new guys come on the show and you're like haha, I remember when.

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[00:24:00]

Frenchy: Well I missed winter quarters because I auditioned in New York and that's pretty much the debut after all their winter quarters back in December and stuff they're still adjusting or whatever

Mike: So, the New York dates are in the spring.

Frenchy: Right.

Mike: [inaudible 00:24:26]

[00:24:30]

Frenchy: So, I caught up with the show at the Spectrum in Pennsylvania and so I got picked up at the train station by Dave Cohen and as soon as I sat in his car the odor just over killed inside the car and he had the windows up and it just smelled like elephant poo. I'm like what am I doing? That was my first impression, but once they got me they had to get me into the show because I was taking somebody's place, so I was in the show by the third day that I was there.

[00:25:00]

So, we were working outside of the arena and in the train yard and just working really hard right there, but they took me to the arena so I could meet everybody and then after I saw the show my first little adventure from there to the- the train wasn't very far, but the clowns used to have a hearse and they said "Oh, we'll give you a ride over there", so I got into the hearse and that became the adventure of a lifetime because I loved train runs, very much so that I dream about them too. We have like circus dreams that are very common and they pop up out of no where, but that's another story.

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But I rode in the hearse and whenever I did the overland trip I would do it in the hearse with the clowns and so that became a very adventurous time, so if there was a place we were going to and we wanted to get there sooner, like go to the amusement park or something we would just all camp in the back of the hearse and we would go to the gas station in the hearse and people are like, they're laughing getting out of this hearse and go grocery shopping in the hearse, the laundromat, so that was my initiation on the first day.

Kyle Neill: So, we know that the circus is a really tight knit community and what we get out of those are some really awesome relationships. I want you guys to talk a little bit about some of the best friends that you had during the circus, maybe a dating relationship or a marriage that came out a circus. Tell us about some of those, give us an insider's opinion.

[00:26:30]

Melanie: How long do you have? Somebody said as the circus turns.

JoAnn: You can tell them first, who you were engaged to.

Melanie: Oh yeah, well it wasn't long before I was probably the 170th edition we were in the 170th edition of Ringling Brothers, I was probably the 170th fiancé of Tito Gaona's. So, and he was the star trapeze artist at the time trying to make the quadruple, we might have a big drum roll, and I had like a handful of diamonds on there and Jo and a couple of other showgirls, because you know I was 19. You know, I got to tell

[00:27:00]

- [00:27:30] you I didn't know anything, I was so self-absorbed, nothing, I was just this is cool man, I got some diamonds. I really don't think I was- I wasn't planning on marrying him I don't think. Anyway, but I did learn how to fly on the trapeze, but anyway we would say- I would tell him, listen when you make the quadruple we'll get married. So, we would go every night, brrrrrrttt, and like about 10 of us show girls we would go and he would miss and we would go ahh.
- JoAnn: Free woman one more day.
- Melanie: Whoo, I'm a free woman. That was really my story there, I mean it goes on, but that's enough.
- [00:28:00]
JoAnn: Oh my goodness, I actually met my husband, father of my two daughters. His security company that he owned was hired every year in Chicago to provide security guards and everything and off duty police officers and what not. We were in Chicago, that was the last- we were there five weeks and it was the day before pay day so the showgirls had no money. We were like what can we get to eat? How about we pool our money and we'll order a pizza.
- [00:28:30]
- [00:29:00] So, I got elected to go in my robe to the back door, back door jack. I went back there to say to someone, "Can you pay for this pizza and have it sent back to the showgirls?", and this man was standing there and I asked him if he would pay for the pizza and he said "Oh, Chicago has the best pizza", and I said "I'm from New York City. New York City has the best pizza", and he was like "No, no, no, Chicago has the best pizza", and I was like "No, no, no New York City", so he said "I'll tell you what, tomorrow night I'll take you out for pizza, if it isn't the best I'll pay for it", I said "Honey, you're paying for it whether it's the best or not", so we started dating. We had five weeks to get to know each other and when the train pulled out of Chicago for Nassau Coliseum in Long Island in New York he was a stow away.
- [00:29:30]
- [00:30:00] One of the musicians was driving overland and he said Lee, here take my keys and just stay in my room. So, I was on a train car with clowns, Peggy the Clown, Bernice was a clown at the time, the King Charles Troop, and Richard I think his name, the musician, whatever. So, Lee was a stow away and we went to Nassau Coliseum and to make a long story short that was 78, in the summer of 1980 we got married in Central Park in New York-
- Melanie: Wearing my dress.
- JoAnn: Wearing her dress, she lent me her dress as a wedding dress. And we went on to have two daughters who also became dancers and what not and the rest is history.
- Melanie: What a story.
- JoAnn: Yeah, so I met my husband in Ringling Brothers.
- [00:30:30]

Mike: For some it happens. In my case it didn't, but I have a lot of friends who have met their significant other, their husband or wife on the show, or maybe even got married on the show and most of them have lasted and even today, I live in the Las Vegas area, and there's a lot of us former Ringling people who live there or they're in Florida. Seems like they're on both coasts, but it's a tight group yet. That bond is there whether it's the relationship or just a friendship with the group and it maintains itself unlike I think a lot of other business or trades or work organizations, it's a different tightness.

[00:31:00]

Jeremy: Like within the band anyway, I didn't meet a significant other on the road, I kind of had a rule with myself and stayed outside of the show with Gold it was much smaller and most everyone was already fam- you know families came on and were already married. The band, one thing I can remember, because we all held each other so accountable on the bandstand like if you weren't in pain or sweating at the end of the show you kind of let down the band you know. Mostly band to begin with, but holding each other to that accountability and just you know for sanity sake we would come up with this random catch phrases or jokes or inside jokes that became more inside, where two years later we couldn't even remember where the hell they started. But when the Gold unit closed we had one last like dinner where we went out in Cedar Rapids, or wherever we closed down and I brought a notepad and said we're going to sit here and keep ordering pitchers until we think of all the cool, random, nonsensical things. So, we have a record for them, just anywhere we go nobody's going to know what the hell we're talking about. I just thought it would be funny that anybody except for these six people, and we'll never get past 20 of them and 227 like numbered things later through like the years of the Gold that-

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[00:32:00]

[00:32:30]

Mike: Remember this, remember that.

Jeremy: Yeah, like where did that one come from. But just having that list, and like nobody else gets it and I don't want anybody else to get it, but I'll just sit there and kind of go through it and we still have like the text thread of just the band guys where every four or five months somebody will say one word and that will like launch this, you know-

Mike: Band [crosstalk 00:32:54] are quirky anyway

Jeremy: I'll take that.

[00:33:00]

Sarah : When I came on the show I was already married. I had Ivy, my little girl with me and in 1972 I had Winston in Seattle on the road. They do not give parental benefits and you stop working and your salary doesn't come in, but there were a lot of relationships that formed among all the young people. There were about 60 people, at least 60 besides the showgirls [inaudible 00:33:35], 60 performers that came from mostly eastern Europe and of those performers they were matched up. People are still married today. They've gone through all their lives together so it was good for me to see that, because I had a child, the old Ringling Circus had a

[00:33:30]

[00:34:00] rule, no children. You did not bring your children on the show. Fortunately the Felds did not have that rule and there were 30 children on the show, so Ivy had lots of playmates and people to watch her during the performance and the showgirls were affectionate towards her, she was a cute little girl ... Obnoxious to some.

[00:34:30]
Donna: I think you get close relationships because you're working together, you're living together, and it takes a certain kind of person to stay in the show. I think we're all a little goofy and you know all have crazy personalities and it all just works. Other people don't understand, I don't know, our personality or whatever.

Mike: No, I mean she's right it's not for everybody. It's not for everybody. When I used to do the hiring I would tell people, okay this is this job and this is what it is or what it is, but then I would tell them almost every bad thing about it and say okay now you still think you want to do this because if you don't you might find yourself 600, 800 miles away from home and decide I don't want to do this. I said, decide now, make the choice. But yeah, it takes a certain kind of person [inaudible 00:35:18] with the lifestyle and the schedule and the work, it's you know, the dedication that it takes.

Melanie: Sometime three shows a day and they were three hour shows, it was all day.

[00:35:30]
Kyle Neill: So, when a lot of people think about the circus their exposure to it is very much surface level. They see a performance, that's kind of what they see and that's all they think about, but with this interview you're really documenting part of Ringling's history. What's something behind the scenes, or something about the community that you really want people to know about? Something deeper than just the performance that people have seen?

[00:36:00]
Mike: Well like a lot of things there's always a lot more to it than most people realize. It doesn't mean the circus, you could be a professional baseball player, but there's a lot more to what they do as well. But again, the work, the dedication that it takes to be the best musician, the best aerialist, the best dancer, the best at what you do. It's hours and hours and hours of work that goes in to it that people when they see the show they have no idea the effort that is taken to make that happen. And then actually moving the show through all kinds of trials and tribulations, the adage the show must go on really does reign true through all kinds of weather and disasters and complications and breakdowns and you name it. It still has to happen.

Sarah : For example, right now the sun is shining, all these windows we have direct sunlight coming in. Yesterday it was pouring down rain-

[00:37:00]
Mike: Right.

Sarah : I knew it would not stop anybody. Circus people will be there, it's not going to prevent them from showing up and doing the best job they know how to do.

Jeremy: It would be like jumps between cities when like the RV tires would explode and we can sit there and whine about it and pretend that it didn't happen or you can just shut up, figure it out, change it because if you don't make it then you don't have a gig-

Mike: The word can't isn't often used in the circus vocabulary-

[00:37:30]

Frenchy: Right, and so as a dancer we have different kinds of surfaces that we have to learn to dance on. It's one thing on a stage, it's another thing to do an arena or a tent show because you have rubber, but you have rubber going over cords, you have elephant poop, you have horse poop, and we slide and we sometimes catch ourselves and so we learn to work just that distance around that arena and then all types of surfaces. So, we just have a unique way of learning what we did at a young age.

[00:38:00]

JoAnn: In 78 the skirt itself was 35lbs and it sat down on our hips, it was flowing so we'd have to spin in one direction, stop, and then spin the other day.

Melanie: But it kept going in the same direction.

JoAnn: It kept going in the same direction, so if you were dancing right behind and elephant and an elephant decided to take a poop-

Melanie: Or a pee.

JoAnn: Right, oh my god-

Melanie: It was even worse.

[00:38:30]

JoAnn: It was even worse, but I had everybody laughing because they were like that was the best [inaudible 00:38:37] over elephant poop I've ever seen.

Melanie: Or, you know you can change directions [inaudible 00:38:45].

JoAnn: Nobody will ever know.

Jeremy: You had the incoming call for the lion or tiger tails at the bandstand [crosstalk 00:38:58]

JoAnn: Oh yeah, you don't want to get peed on [inaudible 00:38:58] by a tiger.

Jeremy: Like it actually ate through one of the road cases.

[00:39:00]

JoAnn: Wow, [inaudible 00:39:00] stuff.

Jeremy: And the floor guys would mess with us with squirt bottles [inaudible 00:39:04].

Sarah : [inaudible 00:39:05] but for those of you who visited the Emerald Barns the camels are so cute, but their spits are [inaudible 00:39:13]. And you get up to them and you'll be talking to a camel and all of a sudden.

Nathan: I think part of behind the scenes is like the abnormal becomes normal for us.

Mike: Right.

[00:39:30]
Nathan: And then it almost becomes harder to relate to what the rest of the world.

Mike: Right, you're trying to explain it to your friends and your family and-

Frenchy: The just can't wrap their minds around it.

Nathan: For us it was just like yeah, of course, the elephant's would poop right there when you're going to walk by or we had one that would poop or pee every national anthem. That was his thing, got in the habit you know, and land of the free, like right in front of the portal. I don't know, going back to the experience is like I think that was special to me because that's something that only the circus people have and that comradery and that behind the scenes. People see the tip of the iceberg, right? And underneath that is this huge foundation that supports all that and they don't see, we were talking about the tornadoes. There was one month where we were playing like Missouri-

[00:40:00]

Mike: [inaudible 00:40:22], and Jonesborro.

Nathan: We had tornado warnings each town and we had to bring all the animals inside the building and I had this moment like this is a very Noah's ark kind of moment. All the people, or the dogs and the elephants and zebra were all in the building together waiting for the all clear to go back out to the lot.

[00:40:30]

Stuff like that where it's-

Frenchy: Insane.

Nathan: Where else would that happen?

Mike: Yeah, who else does that?

JoAnn: Where else, that's right.

Donna: There was one town that there was a stomach bug that went through the entire show so they actually had doctors come in and give everybody IV's in between and they're like all right, who's not throwing up? Okay, you're on and it was so bad, we

[00:41:00]

just had to rearrange the whole show to whoever was sick and who wasn't and it was crazy, but the show has to go on, so that, yeah that was a crazy time.

Melanie: I think also something that struck me is culturally, you know all the eastern Europeans and then you had-

Frenchy: Mexicans.

Melanie: [00:41:30] Yeah, like all these cultures were all under one tent if you will and you know at that time, I would so appreciate it now, at that time I was like oh my god, where am I, who, I don't know. The smells of the food were all different and everybody was talking a different language, it was just like brrrt, it was so surreal, you know.

Mike: It is, it really is many united nations and different languages, customs, cultures, religions, races.

JoAnn: All together.

Frenchy: It's a utopia.

Mike: And for the most part it works, the rest of the world could step back and take a little lesson.

Frenchy: Really, really.

Donna: Yeah, yeah, you become tolerant to a lot of different things.

[00:42:00]

Jeremy: At the annual Gold Unit band punch party, which was thrown on the road, [inaudible 00:42:03] I'm in Gold. Where this huge party where everybody made and designed a punch and it got to the point where Nathan made trophies for a while, there were categories, there were awards and the whole show. Like the elaborate presentations that only circus people could do, some of the contraptions for these punches, but it was just every country kind of sharing and you know everybody spoke the common language that was in the punch, but anyway those were some of like the best- even to not speak each other's language at all, just either through music or just knowing glances and the high fives-

[00:42:30]

Mike: Yeah, yeah. My second language is broken English. I speak it fluently, yeah.

Donna: I think everything the circus does goes above and beyond. Like even a hotdog eating contest is not just an average hotdog eating contest.

Mike: It turns in to a production.

Donna: [00:43:00] It's costumes and prizes and presentation and captain corn dog in his big costume, it's just above and beyond everything.

Mike: Halloween time with clowns that we would do the haunted clown car, they would turn their railroad car into a haunted house and the creativity that the clown's have is amazing.

Frenchy: It's spectacular, scary, special effects.

Mike: We would wait, you know you would finish the show and then you would wait for them to get ready for this to go by groups of two or three through the car and it would be a social event that was just so much fun every year that we would look forward to it. Walking through this clown car and things would jump out at you in different ways, that you don't experience in a regular city somewhere. We do it with our own boundaries.

[00:43:30]

Frenchy: The dancer car and the clown car, I was on it the same time when we had roomettes, we called them roomettes, the 4x6 rooms.

Mike: The smaller rooms.

Frenchy: And so the clowns had that too so all of our doors are sliding doors so as you walk by a different clown room that door would be open or it would come up and out would pop whatever special effect and then at the end of the train car was the kitchen and that was like the grand finale of the [McCobb inaudible 00:44:07] little story of theme or whatever. So, it would be somebody like a scientist pulling out his victims heart and it would be pumping and then we had like toothbrushes through the knee and knives through the head, but it was very good special effects so it was really realistic looking. They learned from a special effects people to be able to do it so awesome, so.

[00:44:00]

[00:44:30]

Kyle Neill: So, in the last several minutes that we have with this interview can I just get some of your feelings on the closing of Ringling Barnum and Bailey?

Melanie: Boo-hoo.

JoAnn: Very emotional.

Donna: I didn't think it would hit me that hard. It's been 17 years since I was in the show, but it felt like- it felt personal, it was so hard to describe, it was really sad.

Melanie: It just feels like a mistake honestly.

Donna: Yeah.

Mike: Very much so.

Donna: It hit me harder than I thought, it really did.

[00:45:00]

Mike: I think that's true for everybody.

Donna: Everybody, yeah.

Sarah : No me.

Mike: No?

JoAnn: No?

Mike: No?

Sarah : I've had many emails, phone calls, because when things happen in the circus world people contact me, the friends that know that I had the circus history. I didn't shed tear, I didn't want to watch the show, it was time for the Ringling Circus to close. The Felds have had it long enough and if it was going to go to new ownership that's fine. I'm sorry to see that the name isn't used, the [Feld inaudible 00:45:33] probably is not going to get that name out again, so that's sad to me and it's- when I look back over the years it's so many years ago that I was on the show. It was an honor to be on the Ringling Brother's Circus and that's part of my history, it's part of our history no matter what we did or who we were. It's a great circus that was gently laid to rest, I knew it was going to happen a year ahead of time because I happen to be in Sarasota when the transition was under way.

[00:45:30]

[00:46:00]

Mike: To some extent I agree with you in others I don't. I mean, it had in recent years not been the shows that we were all used to when it really was the greatest show on earth yet. And in recent years it had declined, it had slipped away. But the fact that it is and was an American icon, and American tradition around as long as major league baseball and to think that those things can go away like that, that this technological world has taken away, again the hard work and the talent and the dedication that performers who are very much like athletes isn't appreciated like it was. And that part's sad.

[00:46:30]

[00:47:00]

Sarah : But at the same time the Ringling Brother's Circus closed, somebody got the right idea in Baraboo to have a reunion so for all of us who wanted to feel connected to the show, those are the 500 people that came to this reunion.

Frenchy: Yeah, exactly.

Mike: [crosstalk 00:47:21] Absolutely, and it will still be the connection that we will always have.

Frenchy: To me it's such a finale

Sarah : [crosstalk 00:47:26] It's a good way for us to come together.

[00:47:30]

Frenchy: This was the finale like with us together. Now it's a national treasure.

- Melanie: How many performers, there has to be how many performers, you know.
- JoAnn: That's why I hope we do it again and again. I hope there are more reunions because there are so many people who couldn't make it or didn't know.
- Melanie: Didn't even know.
- JoAnn: This would be wonderful if it expands, every year, every five years, whatever, but this would be wonderful to do this again. This was a learning experience and now I know to bring my feather boa next time.
[00:48:00]
- Melanie: My eyelashes.
- JoAnn: And my eyelashes and what not.
- Jeremy: Being on Gold that was there the last week and then that was it, no more. My blip was more modern blips, I know that show is completely different, but just within the family, relationships, you know I bought the brand new RV planning on several more years, like finally my old one finally fell apart so I replaced it and then six months after I made that move they announced they're closing us. I unloaded it, it still remained in the circus and went to the blue unit, I was able to give them that, but you know back in Pittsburgh I'm still not adjusted to it. You know a couple years later, like just the chance of this reunion, like oh I can drive 600 miles, I need to do that. [inaudible 00:48:47] every week I can.
[00:48:30]
- Mike: My first year off the road I couldn't sit still. I had to get in the car and just go somewhere, I could not sit still.
- Jeremy: The amount of shows that [inaudible 00:48:56] Pittsburgh, but I come out here and it's.
[00:49:00]
- Nathan: I would say I was disappointed, but not surprised. There were things like, I was in Gold during that transition, with Kenneth kind of handing it off to his daughters and just kind of seeing him reach an age where his interests were kind of going elsewhere you know with the monster trucks that purchased happened. When we were in Coney Island they brought the monster trucks on to the circus lot and had that as a feature as part of the Coney Island thing and just stuff like that where you just kind of start to see signs of like there's kind of fatigue from their side like we have this things, but what do we do with it and they didn't really have the fight I think to fight- they weren't proactive in my opinion about the animal stuff so and so that crept up on them and so they were reactive not proactive in that and by the time they were proactive it was just too late and so it was sad to see that because it felt like there was more that could be done, they didn't have the fight and so that last show I was more emotional than I thought watching the last [inaudible 00:50:04] of the last show and I don't know, it was sad. I was sad to see that because it is an American icon and an American heritage and having been part of
[00:50:00]

that, yeah watching anything like that [inaudible 00:50:20] is going to be really hard on you.

JoAnn: Yeah, we brought one of my grandchildren, the four and half year old because she's the oldest and she'll remember some of it, but to think that none of my other grandchildren will ever experience seeing this ... It's sad.
[00:50:30]

Mike: [inaudible 00:50:36] At least there's this museum they can look up to.

Jeremy: Yeah, this is awesome that they put this [inaudible 00:50:48].

Melanie: You know and the show did seem to diminish some certainly over time and we were in three rings and it went down to one ring, but the show is so spectacular, it still was. The final performance it was like, this is really good stuff, this is entertainment, how can you close this.
[00:51:00]

Kyle Neill: Well, that's all the time the we have for the interview today-

Frenchy: Thank you [crosstalk 00:51:19]

Kyle Neill: I know you guys have so many more stories, you could talk for days.

Frenchy: Just this was amazing to listen to so thank you, I love this group, I love your stories. I feel like I'm taking more and more treasure with me home when I do go home.
[00:51:30]

Mike: My plan here is to come shut up and listen to everything.

JoAnn: Yeah.

Mike: [inaudible 00:51:36]

Frenchy: I think people are going to probably come here every year during the circus week to be in the parade and stuff, I think it's going to turn in to a tradition.

Melanie: I love the parade, the parade was great, it was [crosstalk 00:51:49]

Frenchy: It was just so old timey. I remember I grew up with re-runs of Little Rascals and I always loved the episodes where the circus came to town and they played hooky to go to it and then they were sick and then they didn't go to it. But I loved that and so that's what this reminds me of is that old vintage.
[00:52:00]

JoAnn: And as spectacular as doing a show was, having the train go through small towns and hanging out the dutch doors in to the cars and seeing the families with their children in their arms and what not waving to us and waving to them-

Mike: [crosstalk 00:52:27]

JoAnn: That was one of the greatest-

[00:52:30]

Mike: Freight trains would go past cities through cities all the time and nobody would give a second thought, but as soon as that circus train went by they would be, "Mom, come watch", you know, hey people coming out of industrial buildings and stand there and watch and wave.

Melanie: And it was so long.

JoAnn: It was a mile long.

Donna: And they expected you to be on there in full costume.

Mike: [crosstalk 00:52:48] I wonder what she does, I wonder what he is.

Jeremy: Yeah, they would try to guess, yeah.

JoAnn: But you went through deserts one day and forest the next day and mountain ranges the next day, how awesome is that.

[00:53:00]

Mike: You saw the best and the worst of it.

JoAnn: You did.

Donna: What nobody else sees.

Mike: Yeah, you went through some of the most beautiful parts of the country and then went some of the most- you know through industrial areas that were trashy nasty.

Melanie: And where they parked the trains.

JoAnn: Oh my gosh.

Mike: That varied too, there were good places [crosstalk 00:53:18]

Melanie: Some were wonderful and some were whoa.

Donna: Yeah.

Kyle Neill: Well thank you guys, I appreciate you guys coming so much. Thank you very much.