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Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Homecoming
(Employee Reunion)
Group Interviews, July 22, 2017
Session 4

Interview with Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles) and Darah Velesbir
Interview conducted by Jennifer Barth

Jenny Barth: Thanks. All right, my name is Jenny Barth, I'm here at circus world. It is the 22 of July 2017, and here we are doing an oral history with employees of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. I'll have both of you introduce yourselves, tell me what your job was, the units you worked on, and the years you were with the circus.

Darah Velesbir: Sure.

[00:00:30]

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Well, my name is Jean, Jeannie [de Keyserling 00:00:30], but back when I was in the circus it was Jeannie Ellis. I signed my contract in 1972 for the 1973 show on the Ringling Red Unit, and I signed up as a show girl for my first year, and my second year ... I was there until 76. My second year, in the middle of my second year, I was promoted to head show girl, and I remained the head show girl till I left at the end of 76.

[00:01:00]

Jenny Barth: All right, cool.

Darah Velesbir: My name is Darah Velesbir, and I was on the Blue Unit, 1985, 116th edition, and I did the whole route there, the whole, you know, 116th. Then, 1988, went to the first Japan tour.

Jenny Barth: Oh, wow.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh.

Darah Velesbir: Very cool.

Jenny Barth: Wow-ee.

Darah Velesbir: The Gold Unit, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jenny Barth: Groovy. I'll probably be asking you a little bit more about that later, but first I'm going to start off with the question, why did you guys want to work for Ringling Brothers?

[00:01:30]
 Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Well, it was never a goal of mine. I had just graduated from college-
 Darah Velesbir: Me too.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): ... and, my mother loaned me some money to go downtown Buffalo to buy a suit to interview in, and you know it was one of those days, you guys know this, where you're trying on everything and nothing fits. Nothing works, nothing looks good.

Jenny Barth: Oh, yeah.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): [00:02:00] I was with a girlfriend and she said, "Hey, let's just break this out, you know the circus is in town, it's Buffalo New York, and let's sneak in." So, we did, we snuck in, and we started hanging around the elephants, and if I knew then what I know now about elephants, I would never have done that. We got caught, and to get out of being reprimanded she told them I was applying for a job. I thought, "Oh, that's a good story." I said, "Okay, I'm applying for a job."

[00:02:30] They took us to a trailer and Elden Day was sitting in this trailer. He was an old publicity guy back in the 30s, 40s, 50s. He asked me, "Okay, what job do you want?" You know, he's sitting there, he's got a straw hat on, leaning back in the chair, legs crossed, and I'm stammering because I had never even seen a circus before. Never saw one. He goes, "Come on, you're much too pretty to be concession, you want showgirl right?"

[00:03:00] My girlfriend goes, "Yeah, she wants a showgirl." And, I'm like going, "How am I getting into this?" Three weeks later I got a letter in the mail from Antoinette Concello saying, "Congratulations you've been hired for the Blue Unit. We're in Philadelphia and we need somebody right now."

[00:03:30] I thought, "Oh, this is crazy." I wasn't able to do that right then, but my father always taught me leave a door open. Of course, he killed me when he found out I did this, but he said leave a door open, so I wrote back to her and I said, "I can't make this, I can't do this now, but please consider me for the new season." I sent the letter out, and the new season ... that was in May of 72. October of 72 I get this three page contract in the mail from Ringling Brothers saying, "Congratulations, you've been hired showgirl for the 73, 103rd season or show of Ringling Brothers." That's how I did it.

Jenny Barth: Wow-ee.

[00:04:00]
 Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I don't think too many people did it that way. Did you audition?
 Darah Velesbir: I did, I auditioned down in Boston, and I wore a bright blue unitard. All the dancers wear black, okay? I wanted to stand out, so I wore fluorescent, I mean, bluer than this, like blue unitard.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Nice.

Darah Velesbir: I was a dancer in college and I was on spring break, and my moms like, "Dare, do you want to go to the circus?" I'm like, "Sure, always." I've always gone to the circus. My father used to say, "Sneak in after the pachyderm." We used to sneak in when we were younger. I went to the circus and there was this, it wasn't, it was Clyde Beatty Cole Brothers actually, a mud show. There was a funny clown and I was just a girl in the bleachers, and I had to meet that clown, I had to meet him, I had to meet him. I was kind of crazy. I had to meet him.

[00:04:30]

[00:05:00] During the, in the ... was the break, what is it called?

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Spec?

Darah Velesbir: No, well.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh, the half-time.

Darah Velesbir: Yeah, half-time, the clowns were signing the ...

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Brochure?

Darah Velesbir: Yeah, like the little coloring books.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh, yeah.

Darah Velesbir: And so, my aunt says, "I have somebody who wants to meet you." He looked at my little sister, who was eight, she goes, "No, that one over there." He comes up and like, "You want to meet me?" I'm like, "I guess so." "Meet me in clown alley after the show." I did, and had enough brave to meet him and I, so anyway, we became like instant like, like he's the love of my life, still, after, yeah. Then, I thought I was going to be a clown with Cole Brothers, and the clown said, "No, Dara, you're a dancer."

[00:05:30]

[00:06:00] They actually had a Ringling Brothers program. They ripped out an audition form, so my father he encouraged me, that was great. My daddy, we went down on the train to Boston and I auditioned and only two girls out of like, I don't know, there were a lot of girls there, only two made it and I got on the Blue unit right away and then Karen followed us like a year later.

Jenny Barth: Wow.

Darah Velesbir: Yeah, that was awesome.

Jenny Barth: Wow-ee.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Yeah.

Keyserling (Alles):

Darah Velesbir: Yeah.

Jenny Barth: Your dad even encouraged you.

Darah Velesbir: Yeah, he thinks it's the coolest thing, I mean my father used to take us to the circus when we were little kids and we would sneak in all the time.

Jeanne de

Keyserling (Alles):

[00:06:30]

Darah Velesbir: Behind the pachyderm and behind the, yeah, we just knew how to sneak in. We loved the circus.

Jeanne de

Keyserling (Alles):

Jenny Barth:

Oh, wow.
All right, so kind of going along with that, at the beginning of your time with Ringling Brothers how did you guys feel? Were you comfortable with the process, did you want to jump right in [crosstalk 00:06:47][inaudible 00:06:47]?

Darah Velesbir: It was so cool when I got there-

Jeanne de

Keyserling (Alles):

Darah Velesbir:

[00:07:00]

It was.
... you know, I thought I was going to have like a little room with a curtain and a bunk-beds, and when we had our own little door and our own little sink, that was so cool.

Jeanne de

Keyserling (Alles):

Darah Velesbir:

Oh, oh she-
We got to lock it.

Jeanne de

Keyserling (Alles):

Darah Velesbir:

... she's on the train, you're talking about the train.

Jeanne de

Keyserling (Alles):

That wasn't how I was. I picked up, I knew I wasn't going to be able to take a lot of stuff, so I got a steamer trunk, I found a steamer trunk, you know the clown trunks that they have? I found one of those and I shipped it down, I filled it with just some stuff. When I saw the train and where I was staying, and I couldn't even get the steamer trunk on it, I thought, "This is crazy." The year I had joined they had just gutted a bunch of cars and put in brand new little roomette's.

[00:07:30]

Darah Velesbir:

That's what they were.

Jeanne de

Keyserling (Alles):

Darah Velesbir:

No the, you're talking you had a sink in your room.

Yeah, I had a six by four room.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): No, I didn't, I had a three by three room.
 Darah Velesbir: Oh, gosh.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I had a three by three room by six, and I was six because the water tanks were over me in the room that I was assigned, the other rooms were three by nine. I walked down this hallway, there was only like another three feet, and I'm thinking ... there was a room over here three feet, three feet, three feet, and I'm like, "How did this happen?" And, one of the girls that was already on the show, she said, "You know Big Red, he's our sound guy? They measured him around the waste to make sure the halls were big enough for him to be able to through." That was crazy.

[00:08:00]

[00:08:30] I got into this roomette and it's like you open the door, and that was the bed, except for six inches on this side and six inches on this side, and that was your hanging closet. There was a crumb box, that's what they called them, a box with a lock on it, and I had two shelves over the bed. Now the bed picked up, and I could take the cushion-

Darah Velesbir: Made it into a top-

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): ... and made it into a seating table, yeah.
 Darah Velesbir: ... a table, yeah.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Then there was storage underneath that. Boy, when I realized that steamer trunk wasn't going to work I ended up selling it to a clown and they took it for one of their trunks. But, I cried.

Darah Velesbir: I thought it was so cool.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): She had a bigger room than me, and I thought-

[00:09:00]
 Darah Velesbir: I thought it was cool, I was expect, I was joining the circus I thought we were going to have a curtain. When I saw a door, cool.

Jenny Barth: And a sink.

Darah Velesbir: And a sink.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Well, once I became head showgirl they gave me a state room, which was a six by six with a sink and a refrigerator-

Jenny Barth: Oh.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): ... and it was a bigger bed-

Darah Velesbir: Oh, refrigerators.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): ... and I had a really nice big closet that I bought one of those small dressers that were only like a foot wide for putting stuff in.

Jenny Barth: Oh, sure.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I stepped up once I became head showgirl.
[00:09:30]

Darah Velesbir: I had hired one of the guys and a carpenter and he put up shelves in a little tiny closet to hang-

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): How did you get a bigger room?

Darah Velesbir: We all did, all the showgirls had the same room.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): How many showgirls were on your show?

Darah Velesbir: I can name them all.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Well, there were 30 on our show.

Darah Velesbir: No, I don't think we had that many.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): There was 30 the year I joined, and on that car there was room for 20.

Darah Velesbir: I think we had 20.

[00:10:00]

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): That car had 20 rooms, 10 on each side with four sinks in the middle and four donikers, donikers are bathrooms or toilets, there was no shower, and at the other end from where I was, at the other end, was four small refrigerators on top shelf and four small refrigerators on the bottom and then a stove, and then a, sort of like a cabinet cupboard where there was some dishes and pots and pans. That was communal, everything was we shared.

Jenny Barth: Okay.

[00:10:30]

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I just, well the first few nights I didn't sleep so well, because every time I turned I went whack and hit something, you know, I was like bruised from my train car.

Jenny Barth: Oh, golly.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): It was a little like going back to that, but you know the best I've ever slept in my life was when the train was moving. She knew it right away, she knew what I was talking to say.

Darah Velesbir: Rocking back and forth.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): It just rocks you to sleep.
Darah Velesbir: I know.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): And then you're in dream land.
[00:11:00]
Darah Velesbir: Yeah, it's awesome.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): Then you wake up in a new town.
Darah Velesbir: Yeah, it's fun.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): It was fun.
Jenny Barth: Wow, that sounds magical. Tell us, tell me about your first day on the job.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): You go for it.
Darah Velesbir: First day on the job.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): Because you loved it.
Darah Velesbir: Well were in Sarasota, Florida.

Jenny Barth: Okay.

Darah Velesbir: We had rehearsal and, gosh, it was just really fun. I don't really remember, but I
[00:11:30] remember, like ...

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): Well, how'd you get there, on the bus?
Darah Velesbir: How ... oh, I remember, my mom, I was in, I went to college in Ohio University, and
I was supposed to get married. My mom called me up, she goes, "The circus called,
you've been accepted." I said, and I was in the hotel room with my boyfriend, I said,
"Tell them I said yes." She goes, "Dara, you have to leave tomorrow." I'm like,
"Okay, tell them I said yes, I'm on my way." So, I flew down the very next day.

[00:12:00]
Jenny Barth: Good for you.

Darah Velesbir: Yeah.

Jenny Barth: How about you?

Jeanne de Well, I was kind of engaged too when that contract came through, and I just

- Keyserling (Alles): thought, you know, this is a big company, Ringling Brothers, Barnum Circus, they didn't even really know that I could dance or anything. I could, I had years of gymnastics and dance, or gymnastics, but they didn't know that. I was kind of serious with a boyfriend, I was 20, and you know it was his mother who approached me and grabbed me and she said, "How many women in the country do you think are going to get this chance to do this, and I think you should do it."
- [00:12:30]
- Darah Velesbir: That's cool.
- Jenny Barth: Wow.
- Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): That was her son that I was dating, and I looked at it and it clicked with me like that, so once I flew down, that first day of rehearsals, I remember what she said because I came in ... well, you get on the bus at the train and the bus takes you over to, and I was in Venice, Florida, I wasn't in Sarasota, I was in Venice. It was an old airplane hangar that had been sort of gutted and seats had been put in, the three rings were put in. Didn't have any heat. It was just, again, I looked at this and said, "I can't believe Ringling Brothers, this big company, and this place is a wreck." And, I'm like going, "This is something."
- [00:13:00]
- [00:13:30] But, the people were all great there, and all kinds of languages. You heard German, you heard Hungarian, you heard Bulgarian, you heard British accents, from South Africa, you heard Spanish. I just clammed up and listened because I had never been in a place that was so international. Just, Swedish, no Switzerland I guess was the Knock family was there and they were all yelling at each other, and everybody was kind of friendly and there was only like maybe 10 of us new showgirls.
- [00:14:00]
- [00:14:30] Everybody kind of knew each other, and I just sat back. I remember a clown came up to me, Billy Baker, and I sat down on the ring curb, and I sat facing into the ring curb. Everything was going on, on the track behind me, but he walked over to me and he sat down, and he asked me who I was and everything. He says, "I think you're a natural because you're sitting in this ring correctly." I said, "What?" He said, "You never sit in a ring with your back to it, you sit in a ring looking into it."
- Jenny Barth: Oh.
- Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): That's an old circus superstition.
- Jenny Barth: Okay.
- Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I thanked him for that, made me feel a little bit more comfortable that I was doing something right, but that was my first day.
- Jenny Barth: Okay.
- Darah Velesbir: Yeah, I remember like getting picked up actually now from the airport, with my name on there, Ringling Brothers. I drove, I just was really excited, and when I told you already when I opened that, you know, we had our own door, I thought that
- [00:15:00]

was really cool. I'm ready.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Yeah, that is very cool.

Jenny Barth: All right, and kind of on the converse of that, tell me about your last day with the Ringling Brothers circus?

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Well, my last day was four years later and we were in Cleveland, Ohio. I believe it was Cleveland. It was very sad, because that last show of the seasons is also prank night.

Jenny Barth: Oh.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Did you have that to, did you have prank night?

[00:15:30]

Darah Velesbir: The clowns always pranked everything all the time.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh, yeah. It was when I was on the Red Unit that last show, pranks went on. Like in, like on the, we did, I did an aerial number with all the 30 girls, an aerial number called Spanish Web, and on a prank night the last show of the season, instead of the girl going up she became the web sitter and the web sitter went up. Pranks like that where the audience had no idea what was going on. I, but that very last show for me the pranks were going on, but I just tried to take it all in because it was very sad that I was going to be leaving the show, and you work so hard with these people.

[00:16:00]

[00:16:30] You work day and day at night, day and day out, six days a week. You get on the train Sunday night, you travel all day Monday, you get to the next town by Tuesday, you open Tuesday night. Then, you work with them all day long for the next six days, and I just kept saying, "I can't believe I'm not going to see these people again." Because, there's so many things that go on. What the audience sees is like one eights of the show. They pay money to come in and see a show. What goes on behind stage, at the train, or even when we go shopping or grocery shopping or to the laundry mat, it's so totally different than what the audience sees.

[00:17:00] Because, like Friday morning the bus driver took us all to the laundry mat, and you haven't lived until you've been to a laundry mat with like 10 clowns. They really know how to clear a laundry mat out.

Darah Velesbir: Yeah, they go into the dryer and they spin around.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): They do all kinds of crazy stuff.

Darah Velesbir: I got in the dryer and spun around.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Well, I didn't do that, I didn't go into a dryer.

Darah Velesbir: Forgot about that.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Yeah well, that's what I was going to miss. Not so much the performance to the audience, but the everyday things that happened just living there.
[00:17:30]

Darah Velesbir: I was so in love with the circus and I remember my last day, because my boyfriend at the time, another one.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh, I was going to say, did he [crosstalk 00:17:43][inaudible 00:17:43].

Darah Velesbir: No, no, we got back together for a little while, but he wanted to leave and I was like, so I'm in mister Felds office like crying and he said, you know, I was going to maybe audition for Clyde, no ...

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Salvador.
[00:18:00]

Darah Velesbir: Siegfried and Roy in Vegas.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh, Siegfried and Roy.

Darah Velesbir: He goes, "Why don't you audition for the gold unit?" So, I auditioned for the gold unit and got on the gold unit, so I went to Japan afterwards for the next two years with them, but I cried. I mean I just did not want, I would still be in the show I mean, if I didn't have Mathew my boyfriend who ended up being my husband, I would probably have never left.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Yeah. I probably wouldn't either, and some of the girls actually got married or became girlfriends of people who were really secure in the circus, so that they could stay. I wasn't, I didn't do that, I didn't have anybody that I absolutely fell in love with, and you know ...
[00:18:30]

Darah Velesbir: I fell in with a Brit.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh, did you?

Darah Velesbir: Yeah, he came over to find his long lost, you know his sister, and they ran out of money and they found our bus going by and they joined the circus. I met my husband by I was going out to dance speck, or manage, you know.
[00:19:00]

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Manage is the elephant number.

Jenny Barth: Oh, okay.

Darah Velesbir: It's right before intermission, and this beautiful guy, he had all these clowns on, like blow-up dolls, he's in concession, so I said, "I'll take two of them and one of you." Then went out to dance, and he pursued me after that.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I see now why Charley Baumann was always saying, "Dammit." To you.

Darah Velesbir: Oh, Charley Baumann, I'm always getting in trouble.

[00:19:30]

Jenny Barth: All right, let me ask you the next question. Who was the manager on your show at the time-

Darah Velesbir: Charley Baumann.

Jenny Barth: What was it like working ...

Darah Velesbir: Can I swear on this?

Jenny Barth: Oh, say what you want.

Darah Velesbir: During weigh-ins, he's ... okay, Charley Baumann, big fat German man, okay, and he has to weigh the showgirls every Saturday. We used to get weighed in, you know

[00:20:00] one girl got fired so they, for being too fat, we thought she was a closet eater. I get on the scale and you know I gained weight because, long story short, my mom died when I was on the show and then my sister came out to be on the show with me and I'm not used to eating like, you know like eating, period. I ended up gaining like

[00:20:30] 10 pounds, so Charley Baumann, I'll tell you about Charley Baumann. He is awesome because he would yell at me, "Goddammit Dara." Right?

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): And, you would just smile at him, I'm sure, then go out on the floor.

Darah Velesbir: You get, you know you get three weigh-ins, warnings, you're fired. I ended up getting two. I think after they found out I was taking a dogs diuretic, [inaudible 00:20:55] the show, dogs diuretic, he gave me my contract, and then I lost all the weight because the stress was up. But, after I lost all the weight, and I worked really hard, I mean I would run up and down Madison Square Garden in between the shows, in the bleachers, all the way around twice.

[00:21:00]

[00:21:30] Jump rope. I had the Moroccans they used to teach me how to jump rope, one hour, and then I would like, I'm hungry, so I said to the girls, "Charley Baumann's over there, go to the pie car, get me a hamburger, don't let him know it's for me." After I lost all my weight, you know, and he, because he liked me I think because after that and out of all, in front of all the showgirls, and he said, "Look how beautiful she is." Like, "Look, she worked, and look how beautiful." He said that to me.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Charley was old world. He was old world circus. German guy. I didn't have that, on the Red Unit was Bob Dover. Bob Dover had run away to the circus when he was like 13 and he worked his way up, working with animals and then props, and by the time I joined the show in 72 he was the performance director. He was stoic, he was stern, he never swore at us, he never ... he'd always stand at the back door with his arms folded looking down his nose and watching everything, and if something went

[00:22:00]

awry he would slowly walk up and he'd go next to you and he'd go, "I don't think we're going to do that. Whatever you're thinking, don't do it." Then, he'd walk away. He was very stoic.

[00:22:30]

I remember one time the dressing room, well the arena is set-up there's a back door and then the three rings, and the girls dressing room was at the other end of the dressing, of the wardrobe, which was over here. This particular building had doors that went out, well let's see, yeah they went out off the floor, and come-in was happening. Come-in is when the clowns are doing the show while people are taking their seats. They're entertaining and they're doing their thing.

[00:23:00]

Well, we had one clown, Sappata was his name, a Mexican guy, and during come-in he dressed in a gorilla suite. He'd walk around in the gorilla suite and he'd go up into the stands and pick up a little girl and parents were like going, "Ah, I'm not so sure of this." Things like that. But, I had come out of wardrobe and there was a cat, a catacomb sort of like walk under the bleachers, and he could see me walking by the openings and at one opening he ran in and got me. Now, I'm in my housecoat. I've got my show makeup and my hair on and everything, but I'm in my housecoat because I'm going to wardrobe.

[00:23:30]

Flips me over his shoulder and runs out onto the floor with me and he's running down the front track, and of course Dover's standing at the other end, at the back door, and I immediate, I'm back, I'm looking backwards because he's over my shoulder. He's running towards Dover and all the sudden stop, and like I'm like I have to grab his neck so I don't fall. He flips me around and there's mister Dover going ...

[00:24:00]

I'm like, going, "Oh my God, I can't believe he did that." Sappata got in trouble, I didn't, but that was Dover. He was always very cool. Now, once I became head showgirl he gave me some, many more duties to do that were girl related, circus girl, showgirl related, so that he didn't have to do that. There's things that happened on the show that aren't always pleasant and you know, you've got to take care of them. I remembered one girl, I think it was 75 or 76, anyways she kept falling in the show. Then, we got word from her parents that she diabetic and she wasn't taking her insulin. We never knew it. Never knew it. I think it's 75 now. Never knew it.

[00:24:30]

Mr. Dover approached me and he said, "This might, this could be one of your problems here." I said, "You know, Mr. Dover I, when you asked me in rehearsals who I thought might not make it, she was the one." And, it was a gut feeling, it wasn't anything she said to me, it was a gut feeling. I said, "There is something not right with this one. Dancing's okay, you know, but she, there's just something that just hit me, and you had said to me, 'If it's only one girl you can handle it during this year.'" That was the girl that was having the problem.

[00:25:00]

[00:25:30]

There was times where he was right on me, but you know, I was as honest as the day is long and I tried to the best job I could, and I enjoyed being the head showgirl for the Ringling showgirls, and working with them. I loved working with them.

- [00:26:00]
Jenny Barth: Great. Let me ask you guys the next question. I'm just having a quick gander through my list here. Who helped you along the way when you worked for Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, was there anybody who stands out in your mind who helped you especially, or ...
- Darah Velesbir: No.
- Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I had one girl. When I joined I was not, I didn't think of myself as circus material. I didn't even know about makeup, I had no idea on how to dress myself up. I was a competitive gymnast. I was used to being in front of an audience, especially judges, but going glamorous I had no idea. There was this girl on the show, Tina Torres, Puerto Rican girl, gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous. Minimal makeup and she looked like a million diamonds, or dollars, and she'd always be on the brochures and stuff because she just was photogenic, she was gorgeous.
- [00:26:30]
- [00:27:00] She, I think she took pity on me somewhere along the way, because I didn't know anybody really but on Christmas Eve, we're still in [inaudible 00:27:05], because we're getting ready for opening. Christmas Eve she invited me over to her trailer, she didn't live on the train she lived in a trailer with her boyfriend, Peter, he was German.
- [00:27:30] Then, another showgirl showed up, Jackie Wallace, the only African American girl on the show, on our show at that time. She looked like Diana Ross when she was made up, she was gorgeous too. We had dinner and then Tina said, "Okay, Jeannie, we're going to show you how to do circus makeup and hair, and we're gonna, you know, put this all together for you." So, Tina did my makeup, Jackie did my hair, and they took a picture and I couldn't believe who I was looking at. I'm like, "This is me? I can't believe this."
- [00:28:00] But, Tina and Jackie invited me then to sit in the dressing room at their dressing table, so that's where most of the showgirls spend most of their time is the dressing room, because you're only in your underwear for that. You just don't go out, so I ended up sitting with them at their dressing table, and they constantly encouraged me to change my makeup and fix my wigs. They showed me how to buy wigs and what kind of makeup to buy, and then we brought in one other girl into that mix, another new showgirl, Shondra Rona, was absolute gorgeous too. I thought I was the ugly duckling of the three of them, I was just ... so, I kind of sat back and took notes from everybody else. Those three women were probably my most influential people on the show.
- [00:28:30]
- Jenny Barth: Okay, thank you for that memory. Let me see ... did you ever have a moment during a show or a load-in or an event that frightened you, such as an act that went wrong, or-
- Darah Velesbir: I'll tell you a story.

Jenny Barth: All right.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Go for it.
 Darah Velesbir: It was spec at Madison Square Garden.

Jenny Barth: Oh, wow.

[00:29:00]
 Darah Velesbir: We had the Chinese Acrobatics, that was the spectacular, you know that was the main event. I remember going up, we had like these big hair dress, you know like the Chinese with the spikes all, the big hair dress, and we, all the showgirls, we had to stand on a, I don't know, a trapeze, it would just rises up towards the end. So, towards the end we have to come back down, well my spike got caught up in a cable.

[00:29:30]
 Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh, no.
 Darah Velesbir: Now, we're holding on here and I'm like, we're going down and my head's going up. I'm like, "Oh."

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Need some [inaudible 00:29:39] here.
 Darah Velesbir: I'm like, okay I have to be brave and let go, and undue my head piece, so my head piece goes up and, well, I come down, you know you're not very beautiful.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): No, no.
 Darah Velesbir: Your hair is plastered to your head.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Yeah, pretty much like ours are right now.
 Darah Velesbir: Yeah, plastered.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Pretty plastered.
 [00:30:00]
 Darah Velesbir: I'm like, "Oh." So yeah, that was kind of cool.

Jenny Barth: Oh, wow.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh, yeah.
 Darah Velesbir: Then, it happened again but this time, oh, you know, I think it was the same show. One girl got, she had to stay up there till finale, and the rocket, you know the guys get shot out of the rocket, she's still up there. It didn't come down, the cable.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Oh my gosh.

Darah Velesbir: So she got stuck up there. Mine came down but I was choking.

Jenny Barth: But, you survived.

[00:30:30]
Darah Velesbir: Yeah, another time the band, I don't know if I should say this, but sometimes they fooled around and it got a little dangerous because they would speed up the music. Then, the elephants they danced to the speed of the music. All of the sudden the music is going faster and the elephants are charging down the ring, you know down the ...

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): The track, [inaudible 00:30:52].
Darah Velesbir: The track, the track. All the showgirls we had to like kind of jump out of the way, that was not kind of cool.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): No, that doesn't sound good at all.
Darah Velesbir: That was a little scary.

[00:31:00]
Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I remember one time I was running late for the menagerie number, the elephant number. I was, I had this showgirl dance hall, cowboy dance hall girl costume on with a big, like a small hat but a big plumed feather that was pretty flat. I come whipping out of wardrobe and I'm late. I can hear the music start and I wasn't on the floor yet but I could make it, and I go whipping around the corner to a whole row of elephant butts. On the other side of them was the back door, and they're all standing there swaying like this. Then, all of the sudden the two elephants in front of part, so I go, "I'm going for it." I went for it, and I didn't make it, so I squatted down and then I remembered the hat, because I was more upset or worried about the wardrobe ladies and that hat, so I turned my head so that the elephants went flat against my hat so it was still. So, I'm underneath the elephants, I got my hands out, and I'm going back and forth with him.

[00:31:30]

[00:32:00]
Darah Velesbir: Oh my gosh.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Piccolo, a German elephant handler but a midget, comes walking by. Now him and I are like eye level, because he's that high. He's like, "What is that Jean, what's going on here? What is that?" I'm like, "Piccolo, just get me out of here, just get me out of here." He parts the elephants, I didn't make it on time, I had to run by Mr. Dover.

[00:32:30]
Darah Velesbir: Oh, no.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): I got into the show at a timely manner and got into my spot, but I can see Dover sitting there going like, "What is her problem." He heard all kinds of stories. It's like, "Mr. Dover, the elephants had me trapped between them." That was my big like

wild thing.

Jenny Barth:
[00:33:00] Well, we're running a little short on time, I think the battery in the camera is running a little bit low, too. I'm going to ask you one last question here and, I know I haven't asked you guys a whole lot of questions, but what do you guys want people to know about circus life and about the circus in general, and performances and things like that. What do you think people should know that may not be generally known, or anything that you'd like to share.

Darah Velesbir: Well, we're all family.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): Yeah, we are all family.

Darah Velesbir: Well all ...

[00:33:30]

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): It's like, and I never worked with her and she never worked with me, but she's my sister.

Darah Velesbir: Yeah.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): If I ever heard anybody, anywhere, yell out, "Hey Rube." Even to this day, because that's the cry of help for the circus, I would turn right away and go and help, no matter what. I don't think the audience, they see us just in that glamor performance atmosphere, and that's what we want them to see. We do stuff, we do it day in day out, and we perfect it, and we're performers, and we're damn good at what we do. Our goal was to make sure the show was perfect every time, and you got a good show every time. I don't think the audience appreciated what we really did go through to do that. Then, and then ...

[00:34:00]

Darah Velesbir: Six packs.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): Yeah.

Darah Velesbir: Nine packs.

[00:34:30]

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): Nine packs. You take it from here.

Darah Velesbir: Six packs, that's like a lot of shows, and then nine pack, oh, they're brutal.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): They're tough. Well, you had a shorter show than me right? Did you have a, how long was your show? Two hours.

Darah Velesbir: Probably.

Jeanne de
Keyserling (Alles): Mine was three hours.

Darah Velesbir: Wow.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): A three hour show and that audience, it was a long time for the audience to sit there for three hours, and we had to make sure, the clowns and us made sure that they got a show. The actors did everything that they always do, but we made sure that we accompanied them to make it look great, and I hope the audience misses us with Ringling going down.

[00:35:00]

Jenny Barth: All right.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Because it's a national treasure. We're part of a national treasure.

Darah Velesbir: Yeah. I feel really honored to be part of history.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Exactly.

Jenny Barth: We're honored to have you guys tell us a piece of that history.

Jeanne de Keyserling (Alles): Really, thank you.

Jenny Barth: I think we're going to conclude the interview now, you want to pop the camera off.