

CWM Audio 70-5

Interview with Laura Herriott Ortiz and Donna Ward

July 20th, 2017.

Part 1

Interview conducted by LaVahn Hoh

- Laura Herriott : The oldest daughter of John and Mary Ruth Herriott. My grandfather was Milt Herriott. My grandmother was Viola Engesser Herriott, which the Engesser family also was a repertory theater, circus, vaudeville family. My grandfather joined the Engesser Family Circus and met my grandmother and married her and then had my father and my aunt Jeanie. There was a boy and a girl. Then my mother met my father on the circus. My mother was there as a trick rider with a horse troupe called the White Horse Troup out of Nebraska. My mother was a trick rider and a Roman rider, and she was probably 17 years old. She was a farm girl from Ohio, and she came on the circus and saw the handsome young horse trainer in the center ring with 12 palomino stallions and was introduced by Harry Thomas. The famous ringmaster introduced my mother and father on a street corner in Cleveland, Ohio at the Shrine Circus. The rest is history.
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- [00:01:30] My father was in Korea in the war. He was always very proud of this service. When he came back from Korea is obviously when he met my mother and married. I'm the oldest and I have three sisters: Cindy, Heidi, and Christine. We're all circus performers. We're all ... I'm semi retired now. We moved to Baraboo when I was seven years old. My father took over the performances here, and my family would put on the whole show here at the Circus World Museum we called it then. Now it's Circus World. My friend, Donna ... go Donna.
- LaVahn Hoh: Go Donna.
- [00:02:00]
- Donna Ward: Okay. My name is Donna Skura Ward. I go by Ward if I were in the circus, but my married name is Skura now. I come about that name, my grandmother and my grandfather were Mayme and Eddie Ward of the Flying Wards, and my mother and my uncles were also obviously in the circus. My uncle Eddie, he actually doubled for Burt Lancaster in Trapeze, in the movie Trapeze, and went on to do some Tarzan movies for-
- [00:02:30]
- Laura Herriott : Johnny Weissmuller.
- Donna Ward: Johnny Weissmuller. Then Harold, my other brother, was a flyer. My grandfather and my grandmother, they had a pretty famous barn in-
- Laura Herriott : Bloomington.
- [00:03:00]

- Donna Ward: Bloomington, Illinois with a training barn where they trained people to fly. They trained people like Antoinette Concello, and Art Concello, and Tuffy Genders.
- Laura Herriott : Wayne Larry.
- Donna Ward: Wayne Larry, and some Wayne ... a lot of people who went on to be greats in the industry. Then when I grew up, I was off and on circuses. Laura and I knew each other from little girls on Gil Gray Circus. We just continued to be friends all our lives and then found ourselves again on ... well, she was in Baraboo with her father and I came to Baraboo because my grandmother Mayme was making all the wardrobe for Circus World Museum for the big circus parade in Milwaukee. We came here for my mother to help my grandmother sew for the parade, and my father started working at the museum doing the horse hauling or the wagon hauling and everything, and my brothers. We all worked at the museum, and that was when Chappie Fox was in charge. I loved Chappie Fox.
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- [00:04:30] It was a wonderful opportunity for me, because when I first moved here I lived right behind the museum. When the hippodrome circus was on, the music would play and I would take ... the lady where I lived, they had a little pony, and I'd take that pony and train the pony in the backyard to the music. Well, because they saw me doing that every day, "I guess she likes to mess with horses," and I was always an animal person. Had a little dog act when I was a kid. My brother and I would perform in a whip act. We were always in the circus in some form.
- [00:05:00] Well, he had, I guess Chappie had seen a wagon he wanted, an old wagon in some field in Minnesota or something, and they said, "Well, we'll give you the ... We'll let you buy the wagon, but you have to take this horse trailer and this mule." He didn't want the mule, he didn't want to horse trailer, but he had to buy it all. That was what the story was. He brought this little midget mule, put it in the barn with the Percherons. The mule was not a Percheron, so the person didn't like him, the mule didn't like him, the stableman didn't like the mule. He was like, Chappie was like, "Hey." Since we were living behind him and it was their property that we were renting from, he said, "We'll fix that little shed up for a barn if you'll take this mule, January, and teach her how to drive a little cart for Jimmy," Jimmy the clown. I'm like, "Okay."
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- [00:06:00] That was in the winter. That was after the museum had closed. In the winter, I would go do that. It didn't take very long to do that, so for fun I'd go in the hippodrome and play with her and train her to do trips. Then Chappie one day a few months later said, "How's the mule doing with the cart?," and I'm like, "Oh, she's doing good, but I really taught her a bunch of tricks, so that's really good." He's like, "You taught her tricks?," and I'm like, "Yeah. I taught her a lot of tricks." He's like, "Well, what does she do?," and I told him. He said, "Do you mind if I come over and see this mule, see you do this mule?," and I'm like, "Yeah, okay." He came over and he watched the mule jump through the hoops. She did everything, because I was bored. He said, "You know, we're going to give you an act on the other side of the bridge."
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[00:07:00] He put up a little ring over here by the end of the bridge, and I loved that he put this sign up, because this is such a circus thing. The sign said, because then Chappie wanted me to add birds to it. He said, "Get some birds." Johnny Herriott, he said, "Well, okay. We'll go train these birds." Johnny and I went and Johnny showed me how to train the birds. I didn't know how to train the birds. It was really neat. It was all about Chappie giving me that opportunity, and he put the sign on this little bird cage, "At 4:45, Miss Donna Ward will present her aviary of prismatic doves and January, her sagacious equine."

[00:07:30] Well, people came because they didn't know what they were going to see. They're like, "This might really be something great. We don't want to miss it." But that was Chappie. That was Chappie's words. I mean it was so circus. I did my mule here, I don't know, two or three years, and then I graduated high school here. After that year, that was 1967, then I went on and I joined Ringling. Then again we met up.

LaVahn Hoh: Wow.

[00:08:00] Laura Herriott : We left here and went directly to Ringling. Mister Judge Roy Hofheinz at that time was a partner with Mister Feld in owning Ringling Bros Circus. They came here to Baraboo and we performed our show, our little show in the Miller Hippodrome. They hired my father on the spot and they bought all of the animals. I went. I was just on that at lunchtime. I said, "Can you imagine. I went from growing up in Baraboo from seven years old till 14." Mind you, my parents would go out and do Shrine Circuses in the winter. I had grown up on the circus as a little girl, but we literally lived her. My parents built a beautiful home here and we lived here and went to school and everything, and Donna and I were like sisters.

[00:08:30] Mayme Ward is her grandmother, but she was actually more my grandmother. I actually lived with her. My parents would go on the road in the winter time, because I had to go to school. My father was adamant about us girls all have to go to school, so I stayed here and went to school and I lived with her grandmother. I had a better relationship with her grandmother than she did.

[00:09:00] Donna Ward: That's true.

Laura Herriott : Her mother and father also, I stayed with them various times. We've been friends like our whole life.

LaVahn Hoh: What dates did both of you begin with Ringling? Do you remember the time?

Laura Herriott : We went in 1970. It would have been the ... we finished here the season. It would have been in ... when did they reopen the new year?

Donna Ward: '69.

Laura Herriott : Like January, whenever they opened the new season.

Donna Ward: Yeah.

LaVahn Hoh: In January?

[00:09:30]

Laura Herriott : Probably. Isn't that when we used to have the opening, in January?

Donna Ward: Well, between the blue show and the red show there'd be like a month or so apart. I left, it would have been 1967, because I joined in the middle. Because I graduated high school '67, and then after Labor Day as soon as the museum closed, because I was working the museum, I was working the mule. Then after that closed, then I went and joined mid season.

Laura Herriott : It was very traumatic when she left.

Donna Ward: She's so sweet.

[00:10:00]

Laura Herriott : I was devastated. Then she had a boyfriend here, and she had like, you know-

Donna Ward: We just had lunch with that boyfriend.

Laura Herriott : We just had lunch with him. We were very close. We were a family, totally a family. For me, I was like, "Oh, my God. My life is falling apart." She went to Ringling. We stayed here a couple more years after that, after she went. Then she was just telling me this story of how she found out we were going on Ringling. She said the paymaster, who is a dear friend of ours now, his name was Joey Hodgini. He's from a famous old circus family also. Joey asked her, "How do you spell Herriott? Do you know how to spell Herriott?".

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Donna Ward: Because he knew I knew John.

Laura Herriott : "You know them. How do you spell their name?" She's like, "Why?". That's how she first knew that we were going to go into Ringling.

Donna Ward: He's our new performance director.

Laura Herriott : Yeah, and horse trainer. We went to Ringling with all of the Baraboo animals: 3 elephants, 12 ponies, horses, my mother's dog act. It was like, "Wow." Well, all the years that we lived here, I went to dancing school. My mother was really into the arts.

[00:11:00]

Donna Ward: Canepa I think.

Laura Herriott : I went to the Canepa School of Dance. There were 11 children, the Canepa family. They lived here in Baraboo. Bertie Canepa and I have the same birthday. I went to dancing school always. I was like, "Uh, God." I could dance. Then we went in the winters, my mother would take us to Florida. My mother was very demanding. She was sick of living in Wisconsin in the winter, and all of the circus people lived in

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[00:12:00] Florida. She wanted to go to Florida. My father and mother, we'd go to Florida like for the winter, and I went to dancing school in Florida. Then now my parents left. Like her, my parents went to Ringling, but I was in school. I got left with my grandmother in Ohio. I was in shock to go to school, right? I'm in school in Ohio.

[00:12:30] Now, school gets out. My grandmother drives us from Ohio to Baton Rouge, Louisiana and we join Ringling Bros Circus. It was amazing. It was scary, amazing, shocking all at the same time. I was 14 years old, and now we're with Ringling. My parents were big stars. It was just all huge for me and amazing. I had been on Shrine Circuses and so forth. Now we're in Houston, and one couple, a clown and a showgirl, the clown is going to be here, they had a marriage problem, husband and wife situation, and the wife left. Her name was Maryann, beautiful tall showgirl.

[00:13:00] Well, now all circus kids watch the show and can tell you ... my sisters could tell you which showgirl was wearing the wrong shoes. That one didn't have her gloves on. We'd have dinner and my father would say, "I do not want to hear this at the dinner table. You girls stop it." He was a performance director, and Cindy was the worst. She'd say, "Daddy, did you know she didn't have her hat on?," or this or that. We knew the dances. I knew the dances. I was like ... then my best friend, because Donna wasn't there, was Lou Ann Jacobs, Lou Jacob's daughter. She's my very dear friend. She was one year older than I am, so she was 15, I was 14. She was already in the show as a dancer.

[00:14:00] Now my dad comes to me and goes, "All right, Laura. Do you think you can do this?". They took me in the hallways at the Astro Hall, not the Astrodome, the Astro Hall, and started dancing me up and down the hallway. It's pretty heady stuff when there's 20 dancing girls, and the band plays, and the curtain opens, and you dance down the hippodrome, and they danced. Nowadays they're like la-di-da, you know?

Donna Ward: You travel.

Laura Herriott : The web. The web was Antoinette Concello. We both learned from Antoinette Concello. I watched web. You know what web is, right?

LaVahn Hoh: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:14:30] Laura Herriott : I watch web nowadays and I'm like, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God." It's just tragic. I told my sister that the other day. My sister, Wiener, she'll be here later, she owns a big Shrine Circus. I said, "I can't stand to watch a web number. I just can't stand it." I'm like frustrated the way they do it. We learned. I learned web. This girl, Maryann, was a beautiful tall girl. She rode the lead elephant in Gunther Gebel-Williams elephant number. It was a safari elephant number. Well, here I'm 14 years old. I could ride elephants. I could stand up on their heads. I was beyond the regular showgirl, you know?

Donna Ward: Yeah, you knew a lot.

Laura Herriott : I could Roman ride them, do it all. I rode the lead elephant in Gunther Gebel-

[00:15:00] Williams elephant herd. That band would ... I can't tell you. There'd be 10 spotlights and Gunther Gebel-Williams. Look, I've got goosebumps. The curtain would open and Gunther'd say, "Okay, girlie, here we go." Then that elephant, we both rode her. Her name was Ronnie.

Donna Ward: Yeah, we both did.

Laura Herriott : I used to say she would hydroplane. She held her head up high, and you could sit way back. That's where I learned that on Ringling to sit way back on the elephant. Before that, the girl sat on the neck of the elephant. Like in The Greatest Show on Earth, it looks ugly.

Donna Ward: Because you're bouncing.

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Laura Herriott : You're like ... it looks ugly. It doesn't look pretty. Now, with Gunther's herd, we slid way back and put our feet behind the ears.

Donna Ward: For balance.

Laura Herriott : Now you're sitting up straight and you're like that and you're not moving. You're in that spot.

Donna Ward: Before you hooked your feet on their ears.

Laura Herriott : I'd sit on that elephant and she would just run, and I was in all those spotlights. It was like it was amazing. But I was frustrated eventually because I wasn't an act. I didn't have an act. I was a showgirl.

[00:16:00]

Donna Ward: Yeah, didn't like that.

Laura Herriott : When you're an animal trainer like a horse trainer, my mother had a dog, my father ... you're a one man act. It's not like you're the family act and you do a flying act, or trampoline, or teeterboard. My parents weren't going to say, "Well, here you go, Laura. Go," you know, which I did with my kids. I did do that. My parents did not. I had to figure it out, how I was going to like do my own act. My father did teach me in Baraboo. I rode dressage. I could work liberty horses. I could ride the elephants and everything when we went on Ringling. Now I'm on Ringling and I'm just like one of the showgirls. I was like, "Well, I can do more than that."

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[00:17:00] We were there two years. Went from the red show to the blue show. Then we left Ringling and we went on a little circus called Hoxie Brothers Circus, what you would call a ragbag tent show, right? I was in shock. There again I'd get sent home to go to school, and then I joined Hoxie Brothers Circus. Now I'm like 17, probably about 17. I get to Hoxie Brothers Circus when school got out, and I went to my dad and I said, "Daddy, what are we doing here? This is terrible. Why are we here?". They had purple trucks.

Donna Ward: Compared to Ringling, yeah.

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Laura Herriott : A raggedly tent, and it was a great show. The performance was great, but I didn't even see that. I was used to Madison Square Garden. Here I'm in the mud, in mud you know? My father looked at me and he said, "Laura, because they pay me just about three times as much as they paid me on Ringling Bros." Simple, but it was for me, it turned out to be better because I learned how to do my own acts and then I went further as a performer. On Ringling, I was kind of just a showgirl and I helped my mother or my father, but I never got to go in the ring with the horses like my sister did. I never did. I was always just like the dancer. I wanted to work the horses. I wanted to ride horses. I wanted to do that. For me, it was kind of cool.

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Then a few years later, my parents went on another circus. They act went on Clyde Beatty Cole Bros Circus and I went back on Ringling as a showgirl. Then I was like 18. I was engaged, and the engagement fell through, and I wasn't contracted to go on Clyde Beatty Cole Bros Circus, so I went to Venice, Florida and I went to Kenneth Feld and I said, "Mister Feld, I need a job." He goes, "Laura, you're going to live in the train?". I said, "Yeah, I'm going to live ... of course." He said, "Have you seen the train?". I said, "Yes." "I mean where the girls live?"

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Because I lived in half a railroad car with my parents. It looked like a beautiful mobile home. My mother designed the interior of the railroad car, right? I said, "Yes, I've seen where the ...," and he made somebody take me to the train to show me the train. He thought I was going to be like the little prima donna, you know. The rehearsals had already been on for two weeks. He said, "Okay," and I signed a contract, and I went home and got my suitcase, and I moved onto the train and I got beautiful positions in every production number.

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Donna Ward: Sure.

Laura Herriott : There again, I did like neck loop in the spec and I rode the lead elephant. Then I was older and I was really a dancer now. I stayed for another year by myself, and then I went on and became my ... I started training animals and presenting animals and did cloud swing and so forth. That was the last time I was on Ringling.

LaVahn Hoh: What year was that?

Laura Herriott : 1974.

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LaVahn Hoh: '74.

Laura Herriott : Then shortly after that, then my father would book his acts with us girls as part. We wrote dressage, or we went in the elephant act, or we ... you know. Then I did cloud swing aerial act to make my own money on the side. My dad would give us like \$25 a week, you know, "And don't spend it in one place." My dad said it was a bad thing ... my mother would say it's a bad thing to just hand girls a lot of money.

- [00:20:30] They need to work hard for that. She had a funny way of looking at things.
- Donna Ward: You know what was interesting and what I always felt was one of those decision, what if you made a different decision in your life moments?
- Laura Herriott : There's lots of those. Oh, Lord.
- Donna Ward: Johnny-
- Laura Herriott : The fork in the road thing?
- Donna Ward: Yeah. Her dad, because I idolized her dad, he's the one who taught me how to train up horses. I mean, because we were on the Gil Gray and I was seven years old the first time he was my boss, right? He taught me how. You know, everybody works on those mud shows, so I learned a lot about it training from him then. Then we'd get together again, and then we'd be on another show. It just happened that way. When I graduated from high school, he brought me into the office. Remember the wagon with the two way mirror?
- [00:21:00]
- Laura Herriott : Yes, yes, yes.
- Donna Ward: We hated those when we were working outside. We never knew if they were in or not. He sat me down and I remember Chappie wrote me a beautiful letter, a beautiful letter that he loved having me here and that my mule always looked good, just a beautiful letter. I was welcome to stay or I could move on. Chappie told me, "But just remember a life lesson. If you're not going forward, you're going backward. I don't know what else. You've got goats. You've got the mule. You've got the birds," you know, as far as my little act. He said, "You can either go forward or backwards."
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- [00:22:30] Well, then Johnny called me in and he said, "It's whatever you want to do, if you want to stay or if you want to go. I can get you on any show you want." He goes, "If you want to go on a mud show, you're going to learn a lot of stuff. You're going to learn a lot. If you go on Ringling, you're going to have all the sparkle and the pizazz and everything." My sister was on Ringling at that time. "If you want to go out on Ringling, we can get you on Ringling." I said exactly what you said, it's all the sparkle and everything. It's sure more attractive on the outside than a mud. I said, "Ringling." When I went to Ringling, it was all great and it was all of that, but I do think I missed an opportunity. I probably should have done the other, but then at the same time I went on Ringling, everybody that my family had taught was now running Ringling.
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- Laura Herriott : Management, yes. Yes.
- Donna Ward: Management. Tuffy Genders was-
- Laura Herriott : Was the manager of the show. Antoinette Concello was the head of the aerial department.

Donna Ward: My uncle, Eddie, was not ahead of the train.

Laura Herriott : In charge of the train.

Donna Ward: The train master. I was like the little Ward kid, and I wasn't smart enough then to go around and ask questions about my family when they were young. Which when you get older, you're like, "Why didn't I ask?" I would have went up there and-
[00:23:30]

Laura Herriott : Well, her sister Wanda was a bit of a protégé of Antoinette Concello.

Donna Ward: Yeah.

Laura Herriott : She was red hair, gorgeous body. I mean we're talking in the 60s, okay. She was a beautiful girl and she was a kick ass aerialist. They're an aerial family. Donna really didn't go down that road to be an aerialist.

Donna Ward: I was an animal person.
[00:24:00]

Laura Herriott : But Wanda act was like ... Antoinette was honing her skills to be like the next Vicky Unus or Lilian Leitzel. Actually it was before Vicky Unus, right about the same time as Vicky Unus, right?

Donna Ward: Yeah.

Laura Herriott : Vicky was young. Vicky's younger than Wanda maybe.

Donna Ward: No, I think Vicky was already out there.

Laura Herriott : Was she?

Donna Ward: Yeah

Laura Herriott : Because she started like when she was 17 or something.

Donna Ward: Yeah, yeah. I think so.

Laura Herriott : Because we were on the show. I was on the show with Vicky Unus.

Donna Ward: Yeah, I was on the show with Vicky too.
[00:24:30]

Laura Herriott : We were with Vicky Unus. She was ... I mean it's very sad to say. When you get old, you look at, "Oh, those kids aren't like we were," you know? Never thought I'd be one of those people, but for real. I mean we were just when we were walking up here, I said, "This is the Feld Building," right? I said, "Gee, are we going to change the name of that building now?". You know, like threw our industry under the bus.

[00:25:00] I'm outspoken, you know. The man laughed. He says, "Well, if somebody else wants to give us millions of dollars, we'll put their name on the building." Kind of a catch 22 there, isn't it? It's like, "Wait a minute." Well, we knew ... she knew John Ringling North.

Donna Ward: He still owned it.

Laura Herriott : I came like the next year after the show got sold, and the second year that Gunther Gebel-Williams was here is the year that we joined. Now, my father was a young animal trainer and I fantastic animal trainer, and his father was an animal trainer. Now we go on Ringling Bros Circus. Well, my father and mother were just like overjoyed, beautiful, young people, their careers blossoming. "We're going to go on Ringling Bros Circus." Well, excuse me. Gunther Gebel-Williams was the star of Ringling Bros Circus. John Herriott was in ring three. My father had one season of that. My father, I'll never forget it in my whole life, that's why I admire my father so much, the choreographer, Richard Barstow, got rude at my father, who was the performance director. He'd, "Mister Herriott, Mister Herriott." Remember how Barstow could be?

[00:25:30]

Donna Ward: Yeah.

[00:26:00]
Laura Herriott : He was wicked, acid mouth person. I was like ... but I was a good dancer. When I could dance, I'd dance, you know?

Donna Ward: I had beautiful posture because of him.

Laura Herriott : He was taught and rude and crude, and he got rude with my father. My father was hard of hearing from the artillery in the war. My father was like, "Excuse me. What?". My father was always a gentleman, but he wasn't above like, you know. This Richard Barstow went off, and my dad was like ... my dad walked out of the rehearsal, and the whole rehearsal stopped. The blue show 100th anniversary spec. I was on the center ring spec float with Barbie, who's going to be here. I'm so excited.

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Donna Ward: Barbie's going to be here?

Laura Herriott : We were up there. I watched my father, like, "Well, there goes my father." I put down my scepter and I walked out too. I was like, "Well, my dad's leaving. We're leaving. I guess we're leaving." Well, my dad laid the law to Mister Feld and said, "Mister Feld," and Mister Feld loved my father. He said, "What can I do, John?". You know, my dad said, "Look. I can't." Gunther and my father were fast friends, great friends. They loved each other, but my father, Gunther would chew you up and spit you out if you're another animal person. Imagine that, another animal trainer, very skilled animal trainer, and he's supposed to be the greatest animal trainer in the world. Here's my father with 12 ponies that did everything on the planet.

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- Donna Ward: Well, the elephants did everything.
- Laura Herriott : A pony jumped hurdles on its hind legs. My dad's elephants walked on their hind legs and did all this stuff, you know. Gunther never really like made a move to like hurt my father, but it was just my father couldn't deal with that. He said, "I got to leave. Either I'm going to stay here and stagnate and be the end ring of Gunther Gebel-Williams or I got to go." We moved to the blue show in the middle of rehearsals again. We moved to the blue show, and my father took over the center ring liberty horses. The ponies stayed. My dad's animals stayed on the red show. We went to the blue show.
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- [00:28:30] Now, mind you here I am in the middle of red show rehearsals two weeks in. Now I change to the blue show and I'm two weeks late for those rehearsals. No, we started over. I'm sorry. One would leave and the other one would start up. Now we go to the blue show, and my parents were totally happy. My father rode dressage in the center ring and worked the 12 fantastic white horses.
- Donna Ward: It's where he should have been.
- Laura Herriott : My mother worked a liberty act there. Lilamon worked the horses over there. It was a big move. But like she said, when you take those forks in the road, my father had to have the nerve to say, "I'm taking my family and I'm going. I'm not going to live like this." It was a cold ... We're German descent, my family. My dad was funny. He'd say, "Those Germans." We went to Ringling now, and we're very outgoing family circus people. Circus people are family. My kids, Armando with the elephants is my son's ... he's my son from another mother. His mother was one of my best, dearest friends in the world. We're close people, like American gypsies.
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- [00:29:30] We're close, you know? I forgot what I was saying now. We went-
- Donna Ward: The Germans.
- Laura Herriott : The Germans. Now we get to Venice, Florida and it's Christmas. Well, we've got a million friends, circus people, in Sarasota and we're in Venice with our RV. My dad, four little girls, and here we are. My mother's like, "Let's go to Sarasota." We weren't like in the fold of the German, we always say the royal family. They were all like royalty, like from Europe, and they were all Germans. Charlie Bowman, Jeanette Williams.
- [00:30:00]
- Donna Ward: Althoff.
- Laura Herriott : Well, they were gone.
- Donna Ward: But they had been down there.
- Laura Herriott : You know, and it was all ...
- Donna Ward: I love her.

- Laura Herriott : They had a huge Christmas party 20 feet from our trailer and never invited us to come or come over, have a drink, have a little Christmas cheer, have anything, nothing. I'll never forget that. My father was so sad. But we were like, "Well, that's all right. We'll get over that," and we got in the car and we drove around Venice looking at the Christmas lights and stuff. I always remember that. Then the next day we went to Sarasota. It was like, "Nevermind." After we went through the fire with those people, they became also like really close friends to us.
- [00:30:30]
- Donna Ward: Good friends, sure.
- Laura Herriott : You know, but that was tough. That was tough. My dad was like, "Wow. I just quit, and now we're in the blue show, and now here we sit." It's like, "Oh, boy," you know? It wasn't easy. As a performance director, my father, that's a hard job. That's a hard job. Now they call it human resources. Back in the day, it was my father. Bob Dover first was the boss, and my father was his assistant. Then my father became the performance director. Boy, you got the marriages breaking up, the elephant guys beating each other up. You've got somebody's going to have a baby. This one's going to do this. Oh, my God. My dad was a great, great performance director.
- [00:31:00]
- [00:31:30] The one clown comes to my dad, Brucey. Remember Brucey? Bruce and Dale, the gay guys that were clowns. Brucey, "Mister Herriott, I just can't perform. I'm sick. I just can't. I'm sick, Mister Herriott." My dad's like, "Brucey, really? Well then you need to go to the hospital." My father was either go to the hospital or work. My father says, "Do you know Gunther Gebel-Williams?". "Yes." "Greatest circus performer of all time. Do you know what happened to him last night? He got his foot in the coupling of the train." Do you remember that?
- [00:32:00]
- Donna Ward: I remember him.
- Laura Herriott : They were loading animals. He stepped and the train shifted, and Gunther got his foot smashed in the coupling of the train. My dad said, "Did you know that, Brucey?". "No." "Well, did you see him miss anything?" He did. He was out after that. He was out for a little bit. He'd come out and stand there and call the elephant number.
- Donna Ward: Technically he didn't miss a show.
- [00:32:30]
- Laura Herriott : He didn't miss a show. It was like ... but my father was such a fair and good. You could have the girls having little hissy fits, or you could have star wars. There were big stars in those days, you know? Then when they'd line up that finale. It was rehearsal and they're going to line up the finale.
- Donna Ward: Got to know who you're putting next to who.
- Laura Herriott : You'd better get that right. It better be who's in the front and center, who's on that side, who's on that side. Then in a three ring display, you never want to be the act that's in the back door. That's half of those people. If you have to be in a three ring
- [00:33:00]

display, you better put me in that end. If you're in that end, it's like that's kind of like those are just little ... another thing is I've continued on. I just retired two years ago. If you're in the show and you see the program and you're the first act after intermission, if that happens to me, I'm devastated. I'm like, "Oh, my God. No."

[00:33:30]

Donna Ward: Half the people aren't in the seats.

Laura Herriott : The producers and the performance director people, they don't know about that. "Oh, let's open the second half with Laura's dog act." "How about no."

Donna Ward: Yeah.

LaVahn Hoh: What would be devastating about that?

Laura Herriott : Because-

LaVahn Hoh: People aren't coming-

Laura Herriott : Three quarters of the people are still buying cotton candy.

LaVahn Hoh: Still out there, yes.

Laura Herriott : Everybody's making noise, and they're tearing down the pony ride over there. They're walking down the hippodrome track. It's like, "Put the hula hoops in there, not me." You know what I'm saying?

[00:34:00]

Donna Ward: no, absolutely.

Laura Herriott : It's like, "No." Like in an opera or you go to the theater, everybody better sit down. You'd better be in your seat. Well, the circus doesn't have that. They're in the bathroom still lined up. The toilets don't work in the ladies room and there's 100 people in line.

Donna Ward: If you have that mentality, which we do, that there is a star.

Laura Herriott : As an artist.

Donna Ward: I mean we're losing it with Cirque du Soleil.

Laura Herriott : It's lost. It's lost.

[00:34:30]

Donna Ward: It used to be. I guess if we put it like if Adele came to sing. Are you going to put Adele right after intermission?

Laura Herriott : Wait for the ladies to come out of the restroom before she sings her song? No.

Donna Ward: Now, that doesn't sound crazy. You'd say, "Well, of course we're not going to put

Adele right after that."

Laura Herriott : But back in the day, back in the day ... here I am so old. "Back in the day."

Donna Ward: I know.

Laura Herriott : It was people ... there was a sense of that. There were great stars in the world. You wanted your name spoken. You wanted to be a star. I'd look-

Donna Ward: Your names were on billboards.

[00:35:00]

Laura Herriott : I did the aerial ballet with Vicky Unus.

Donna Ward: Me too, yep.

Laura Herriott : With Elvin Bale, and I would look at them. Like I'd be turning to watch.

Donna Ward: As we're working, we're watching them work.

Laura Herriott : I'm in the dressing room and the girls, the dancing girls come in there, and they're having a fit. A couple of them are having fits. "I'm so sick of that. We're hanging on the webs," and we did a hard web routine, hard. Two loop, hard, long.

LaVahn Hoh: With front and back track?

Laura Herriott : Yes.

Donna Ward: Yes.

Laura Herriott : There was like 24 webs or whatever, right?

[00:35:30]

Donna Ward: We did a Cancan before we climbed up.

Laura Herriott : Elvin Bale, I think this was a bicycles built for two. Elvin Bale, this was 1974, he was the center ring star. Elvin Bale did a single trapeze that was world class, and his finish trick was a forward dive catching by his heels. He would scrunch down. Did you ever see a video?

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah. I saw him live.

Laura Herriott : Well, then you know. Then you know. We're hanging on the webs, the web girls.
[00:36:00] We'd have to wait, and we'd have our leg wrapped, and we'd be there like in a pose, whatever right, until he went. Then when he went, as he was finishing and coming down, then we came down, big tada to Elvin Bale, right? Well, these girls come in the dressing room. "I can't stand it. I'm going to complain. We have to hang on those. Do you know how many times he did swing before he dove out by

[00:36:30] his heels?" It was like, "Really, girls? Really? You mean this man is going to ...," and he didn't have a belt. You know, it was just a little like-

Donna Ward: Those things I remember with Larry, Wayne Larry's troupe and the Ganoas.

Laura Herriott : Yes.

Donna Ward: They would do things, like remember the music?

Laura Herriott : That was Mary Gil.

Donna Ward: Mary Gil and Cello. They didn't get along. They had a fist fight in the dressing room one time.

Laura Herriott : Wig in the toilet.

Donna Ward: Wig flushed down the toilet, cops were brought in. Yeah.

[00:37:00]

Laura Herriott : Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Donna Ward: But it was a nice dressing room. It had carpet on the floor, and it was big.

Laura Herriott : Wig in the toilet. Yes, yes.

Donna Ward: But the music was-

Laura Herriott : Barbara Woodcock and Jeanette Williams.

Donna Ward: Yeah.

Laura Herriott : Somebody was sitting on a horse, and somebody was walking by and reached down and got her by her red hair, and like, "No, no, no." There were star wars.

Donna Ward: Like with the flying act, they would wait. They'd be mad at each other and nobody would go first for the passing leap. Remember? They'd wait up there, and the music would go, "La, la la, la la," and they're sitting there and wouldn't go. They would like, "No," because they were one of the last ones to finish.

[00:37:30]

Laura Herriott : When you see like The Greatest Show on Earth, they're going to show that at the movie theater.

Donna Ward: Now that's a star.

Laura Herriott : I know it word for word by heart, word for word, and my children know it word for word. My classic Christmas Eve is to watch Jumbo and Showboat, and we watch Jumbo and Showboat. Jumbo is one of my all time favorite circus movies. I know every word of every song. I can sing the songs. I wish I felt better and I could

[00:38:00]

breathe better. I would sing that song for the opening of that show they're going to do down there. The opening of Jumbo is classic, classical. Then of course Sawdust and Spangles and Dreams is what they're calling the show, but that's from Jumbo. That's not from Ringling.

Donna Ward: Yeah, yeah.

[00:38:30]

Laura Herriott : But it's just when you live those things in your own life and then you see, like in the movie Jumbo when the tent rips and the girls are up there. I've done that. I've been there and done that. I've been the ringmaster and the performance director on the circus when the storms came, and you're looking at the people in the audience. I went to the manager of the show, and the manager of the show was having a fight with the owner of the show. I said, "Look, we need to get these people out of here. I'm a circus girl. If I'm afraid to be in that tent, then I think the public needs to get out." I'd been in a lot of blow downs, bad blow downs.

[00:39:00]

[00:39:30]

I went and got that microphone. I was the ringmaster. I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we've been advised by the local authorities that for your safety and the safety of our artists, please exit the circus tent as soon as possible in a timely fashion and mannerly order and get the hell out of here." Sure enough, it took out like the whole ... it ripped the lace lines. The tent and the water came in just like in the movie. It was like when you experience those things and then you see those movies, it's like, "Oh, my God. They're playing my song."

Donna Ward: I remember my mother talking about the time, the Hartford fire I guess.

Laura Herriott : Yeah.

Donna Ward: I think she was on it, and she said those people died. All they had to do was pick up the side wall and go under it, but they all went to the front and trampled each other. That's how they died. They trampled each other. My grandfather was in the-

[00:40:00]

Laura Herriott : The wreck.

Donna Ward: The train wreck, the big.

Laura Herriott : Hagenbeck-Wallace.

Donna Ward: Hagenbeck-Wallace.

LaVahn Hoh: Hagenbeck-Wallace.

Donna Ward: The famous ... yeah.

Laura Herriott : Yes.

Donna Ward: My aunt Jennie died there.

Laura Herriott : Her grandmother Mayme told me the story that Edward, her husband, they got out but Jennie Ward didn't get out. Jennie, the sister, didn't get out. She did the Lilian Leitzel act. Jennie Ward, her great-aunt, did the Lilian Leitzel one arm swings. Like Lilian Leitzel went to Europe, and then Jennie Ward was the one who was doing it on Hagenbeck-Wallace. Mayme said that Edward kept going back into the train looking for his sister, and he kept bringing people out. In the meantime, he had a head injury, which was so severe that it required him to have a plate in his head, and he was never right after that. He was like for the rest of his life, it was ... and he didn't find his sister. She died in that wreck.

[00:40:30]

[00:41:00]

Donna Ward: She died.

Laura Herriott : Yeah.

Donna Ward: She was pregnant.

Laura Herriott : I did not know that.

Donna Ward: She was not going to be on the show. She was gone. They were leaving, but it was late. They were partying or something.

Laura Herriott : Because she was pregnant, they were going to leave.

Donna Ward: They were going to go, but somebody convinced them. She said, "I'll just ride the train to the next building, to the next place," and that's when the wreck happened. Otherwise she wouldn't have been on there.

Laura Herriott : We're not letting this gentleman give us questions, Donna.

[00:41:30]
LaVahn Hoh: No, I'm enjoying this.

Laura Herriott : I could talk forever

Donna Ward: Yeah, I'm sorry.

LaVahn Hoh: That's all right.

Laura Herriott : We're not giving you any chance to ask us poignant questions.

Donna Ward: One thing that I remember my grandmother telling me, you probably remember this, is she said that she went out, like my grandfather took her and put her on the tracks, and she said the lion, you could hear the lions screaming, and people screaming, and the burning. She said it was awful, but Merle Evans was right next to her. Merle Evans got out somehow and was sitting next to her. She said Merle Evans and her are sitting in the middle of all this horror, and she looked down and all of grandma's toes were dislocated and they were sticking straight up.

[00:42:00]

Laura Herriott : Oh, my God.

Donna Ward: She said because when it hit, she hit against the train or whatever.

Laura Herriott : Yeah. They were all in berths.

Donna Ward: Yeah.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Laura Herriott : It was all berths. The married people got the lower berth, the girls got the next berth, and guys got the top berth. It was like craziness.

[00:42:30]

Donna Ward: She said that her and Merle Evans started like laughing at how ridiculous her toes looked. You know what I mean? Like it's all this horror going around.

Laura Herriott : It's one of those horrible things, yeah.

Donna Ward: Yeah.

LaVahn Hoh: Wow.

Donna Ward: I am so sorry.

LaVahn Hoh: No. I'm glad we're recording this. This is great history.

Laura Herriott : I could talk for the rest of my life.

Donna Ward: Yeah.

[00:43:00]

Laura Herriott : Give me a little tidbit of something and I'll ... there's so many things about my industry that I'm so passionate about. There's so many things that right now today, there's people out there working every day traveling over night on our highways doing incredible things, not Cirque du Soleil. The Shrine Circuses. There's just a few tent circus left. There's some performers right here. I just saw the little boy, Eric.

[00:43:30]

They were with me on Kelly Miller Circus. The parents, the father does the wheel here. I haven't even said hello to him yet. Their son Renato was with me on Kelly Miller Circus and I had a little dog act. I was there by myself and I needed help, so he was my little dog act helper. He was like 10 years old, Renato. He's a quadruple somersaulting superstar in La Nouba in Orlando.

[00:44:00]

I'm so proud of him, and his brother is here. I saw him. I didn't know he was here, Eric. Like there's kids out there right now. This is not ... the coffin isn't closing on this. I wish ... it's hard, because so many people now, "Oh, well the circus is over. Ringling Bros." No. No, it's not. My daughter is a gorgeous, super talented circus

performer.

Donna Ward: Beautiful performer.

[00:44:30]

Laura Herriott : She works six zebras, and she works camels and zebras and ponies. She has a dog and pony act. I told her the other day, I said, "Jenny, when they announce you, everything is a dog and pony show. The transition is a dog and pony show. This is a dog ... everything's a dog and pony. What's supposed to be something crazy is a dog and pony show." I said, "Jenny-"

Donna Ward: I have a dog and pony show.

Laura Herriott : I said, "Jenny, you are ... you tell the ringmaster, I am going to take you back to the beginning of the real circus. I am the dog and pony show." She does a dog and pony act, the dogs ride on the ponies. My grandpa did that, my daughter does it, my mother did it, I did it, all my sisters do it. It's old school. My daughter has this ... she took it to the next level. I can show you pictures where my mother, we had what we call the long mount, like they call like the Conga line people say with the little dogs. Everybody does that. Okay, okay. You know what my daughter does? She has a white pony that walks on his hind legs, and then the poodle dogs, and then the little dogs. She has eight dogs, and the white pony, and she walks them on their hind legs.

[00:45:30]

We're sad, because in our life with myself and my children, we're all circus performers. We always aspired ... I aspired for my children. I personally never worked an animal act on Ringling Bros circus. My sister Cindy did, but I didn't. I've had a whole career, lifelong career, but I always was like my kids, I was always like, "Well, you can get on Ringling. You've got to book that act on Ringling. We need to get that act ready so you can show it to Feld or Tim Holst," or whoever is the latest, finds the talent, the talent scout. Now it's over. That breaks my heart, because for us, for my kids, or my grandchildren, or my niece, or my nephews, it's like that's over now. It's kind of left a big space for me in that way.

[00:46:00]

LaVahn Hoh: You're answering my next question. What are your feelings about the closing?

Laura Herriott : I am angry. I'm angry, because they let it get to the level that it was. I'm angry for that. I understand. I'm not stupid. I understand logistically. Yeah, I'll go on record. My cousin is a senior vice president of Feld Entertainment, so I should watch what I say. The elephant thing was ridiculous. It was ridiculous. It was ridiculous. They already won. They were the poster child for winning that battle. They won that battle.

[00:46:30]

Donna Ward: Nobody knew it. They didn't really publicize it.

Laura Herriott : Let me tell you something about elephants. Elephants are incredible creatures, but they require incredible care. They're heavy. They poop mountains. They drink gallons. They require ... the care of them is incredible. They got down to Ringling

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- [00:48:00] Bros Circus having five elephants, and it took five guys to present five elephants. My example-husband was a little elephant trainer. We were on Carson & Barnes Circus. He was a great elephant trainer. We were on Carson & Barnes Circus. We had 26 elephants on the road. We presented 19 elephants in five rings. Well, you couldn't logistically do that anymore. I think the circus needs one elephant, like Jumbo. You could build a whole world around one or two amazing elephants. I don't think that you need to have 20, but-
- Donna Ward: Because you're recognizing the problems.
- [00:48:30]
Laura Herriott : Feld, they let it happen. They didn't ... it's like it used to be the trainer was in charge. The trainer is the all-knowledgeable person. I know more about camels and zebras and elephants than 80% of the veterinarians. All I need to know is their college education medications, what would I give this animal for this problem, but I'm going to see the problem. I'm going to know. I'll know how it eats. I'll know how it poops. I know how it urinates. I know how it feels. I know if it's sad. I know if it's grumpy, angry. That's inside me, and my children too, and my father, and my grandfather.
- [00:49:00]
- Donna Ward: All of ours.
- Laura Herriott : My mother and my sisters, we can feel an animal's feelings. When all of a sudden there's a witch hunt for you that you're an evil person, an evil entity, it's just there's never been a level of interest in animals like there is right now in the world. They're just discovering something I've known all my life. We've lived with animals in our door, outside of our door, in my backyard. Christmas Day, New Year's Day, New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving Day, we've lived, eat, slept, and breathed with animals our whole life, and now we are like the abusers. It's like, "Oh, my God." It's just craziness. Feld won that battle. They did away with the elephants because of a financial thing in an industry, and that was a financial decision. I don't believe for one minute ... they let the activists believe that they did that. They made them like all powerful. They won. They already won.
- [00:49:30]
- [00:50:00]
- Donna Ward: You tell people, they don't even know it. You say, "Well, they won that."
- Laura Herriott : Then it did prove the point that once the elephants were gone, that was it. It was over. The American public must have wanted to see the elephants.
- Donna Ward: Yeah.
- [00:50:30]
Laura Herriott : How do you do? It's like you can't ... We don't talk politics. We're sisters and we're on opposite ends of the political situation. We don't talk politics. I don't get it. It's like I can't understand, I can't put my finger on it, what's going on. I can't put my finger on it, how we can change this, how we can move forward from this and change it. It's like there's still dressage in the Olympics. There's no difference between dogs doing agility and elephants doing their elephant act in the circus. It's
- [00:51:00]

like how-

Donna Ward: They're still tricks.

Laura Herriott : It's the best thing for them. There's no more wilds. Feld to me sold out with the elephant thing. Then she went to the last show. I didn't have any desire.

Donna Ward: I went to the last show. I took my children. They were born there.

Laura Herriott : It wouldn't have been pretty if I was there.

Donna Ward: Yeah. Two of my children were born on Ringling, and I felt I owed it to my family to be at that last circus.

Laura Herriott : Yes, yes.

[00:51:30]

Donna Ward: I went a long way and went there, and I'm really glad I did.

Laura Herriott : Two years ago, my mother and my father passed away within six months of each other. My father, two days after my father passed away they announced that they were taking the elephants off the circus. All anybody could say was, "Thank God he didn't live to see that."

Donna Ward: Yes.

Laura Herriott : I would die ... I would die to have a conversation with him about politics right now and what he thinks of this. You know, I understand logistically, but yet performance wise, the Ringling Bros Circus was like there was nothing to it. They try to do it. My son now is a big shot with Cirque du Soleil. Go figure. Because he's such a knowledgeable circus guy, and he's a certified rigger. He's three way certified. My son can like save people from a mountainside if they need saved. Like he's a climber. He was an animal trainer. He's not an aerialist. Her family's the aerialists.

[00:52:30]

[00:53:00] My son right now is in Edmonton working for Cirque du Soleil, flying in performers and lifting the props. It all goes up and down. I went to see the show in Houston, and the performance, the artists are incredible, the things they do and the tricks they do and so forth, but I was bored and I said I felt like I was like sitting there and I didn't want to raise my hand and say, "I'm a circus animal trainer." You know, like maybe I'd get shot. It's a whole different type of a crowd that goes to see, and no children. It's not for children. I didn't get the premise of it, so how would a little kid get it, you know? The artists, not one artist has their name mentioned. There's no feathers, and capes, and headpieces, and beautiful horses. It's like it's not a circus.

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It's no comparison. It's cirque. It's cirque.

Donna Ward: Even these aerialists that are fabulous coming out, and they work solo. You never hear their name. They put a mask on them with feathers on their head.

Laura Herriott : Then the next comic caricature comes out and they leave, and then it goes into the next thing, and I'm like, "Dude, that person just did the greatest act I've ever seen. Like what was your name?". But then train them out in Quebec, and they're not stars, and they're a company. It's a company. But yet a ballet company was a prima ballerina and the solo male artist, and an opera has the-

[00:54:00]

Donna Ward: The theater.

Laura Herriott : The diva and Luciano Pavarotti. Hello. I want to be the diva, you know.

Donna Ward: The theater. You know who the stars are.

Laura Herriott : The theater has the stars.

Donna Ward: You look at your playbill. You know who everybody is.

[00:54:30]

Laura Herriott : I don't get it, and the people love it. The people love it. I don't get it. I'm like I want to see a horse with plumes. You know, I just don't. But I think Ringling ... now in Sarasota they're producing the summer theater in Sarasota. We go every year usually. We try to. It used to be a family event if we were available to do it. I'd fly to visit my parents, and then we'd, whoever was in town, we would always go and see it. It was a Circus Sarasota thing. It was always good, and now Ringling is, Feld is producing that. I'm like, "How did that happen?". I don't get it.

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Donna Ward: You know what is so crazy about that, and I just won't take long saying it, but my second career is with dogs, like in the grooming business.

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Laura Herriott : Donna is literally a world class groomer and knowledgeable of dogs. She's missing the Houston Dog Show right now, being a judge at the Houston Dog Show.

LaVahn Hoh: Wow.

Laura Herriott : Which is huge, because she came to be here with the Ringling thing and be here for the circus, which she says is her first love.

Donna Ward: Absolutely.

Laura Herriott : But I'm like, "Oh, man. I want to go with her to the dog show, too."

Donna Ward: In the grooming business, you know you have these people around you, your friend groomers, the people you hire, and you saw you were on the circus. They're like, "Oh, they're mean to their animals. They beat their animals." Meanwhile, I am working on a dog who I am taking ... I mean I'm just going to name three things. I did an Afghan one time. I had to cut like through the mats, because we all know. We've all had dogs and they get matted and stuff. I understand that. I had an Afghan so matted on time that as I'm cutting the mats out and combing them out,

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[00:56:30] there's a dead lizard in his coat, okay. I've had them where the people have come in and they neuter their dogs with a rubber band around them like a goat. They are all infected. Dogs come in there so skinny, they're sickly. They're so abused. They're so abused all the time. I'm like, "This is in your back yard." The way it's set up, you can't go rescue that dog. If I say, "There's a dog over there chained to a doghouse. He hasn't had water or food in three days," they go and give them a notice. They can't even go in and get the animal.

[00:57:00]

Laura Herriott : Yeah, that's true.

Donna Ward: They have to give them a notice.

Laura Herriott : if it was us, if it was me with my dog act, they would come and take my dogs away and put it in the newspaper and on television. It's wrong

Donna Ward: Yeah, and this is probably the same person who's talking about how badly an elephant looked. Do you know anything about an elephant?

Laura Herriott : This boy here with the elephants, I don't know if you know who he is, the elephant trainer here.

LaVahn Hoh: Here.

Laura Herriott : Do you know who he is?

LaVahn Hoh: I know who he is.

[00:57:30]

Laura Herriott : He's Armando Loyal. He's from the Loyal Repensky family. His mother was one of my dearest friends in my life, Lucy Loyal. We were on Carson & Barnes together. We've been true hell and high water literally together. He's my son's best friend. You know, I can't wait to spend time with him. I said, "Oh, we'll get back. We'll come back and we'll hang out." He would, as any of us would ... he has seven children, Armando, by the way.

Donna Ward: Wow.

[00:58:00]

Laura Herriott : He's crazy as hell, Italian. He would have to portion it out between those kids and those elephants. If it was their last dollar, everybody would be on the list, as well as we were. I know times we were very broke financially, and my father smoked. He quit smoking eventually. He'd roll his own cigarettes. Then the pump broke in our house. I'll never forget it. In Florida, and my dad went and got Pete Cristiani, used to own a circus and he had an old water truck like in his backyard. Pete Cristiani got the water truck, and they went and filled up the water truck, and they'd come to my house until my dad could afford to get the pump fixed and give water to the animals.

[00:58:30]

[00:59:00] It was like we've been through things where myself personally and my kids, I have three children. I was a single mother and we lived on the circus, worked on the circus. I was a circus animal trainer and my kids, we lived for those animals. We'd be poor. Carson & Barnes, oh my God that was so hard. They weren't famous for paying salaries. I'll tell you that. But the thing of it is, it's like as an artist, you can understand as a professor in history and all these things, it doesn't come easy. If you're going to hone your skills, like she said you take that Y in the road, you're going to hone your skills. It's like, "Wait a minute. I can go over here and do this, or I can go," and Carson & Barnes Circus had horses, and camels, and llamas. I trained a big and little, a camel act, a dog and pony act, and a horse act all in one winter and produced four rings of performing animals. It was pretty amazing. It's probably the greatest thing I've done in my career as a trainer, and trained people to work those animals. I think I got paid, I don't know, maybe \$600 a week.

[01:00:00] Then they have what they call the Pie Car, right? They've got a Pie Car. They pulled my trailer. We had an RV trailer. My three little kids, and my son worked in the show, worked an elephant act. One juggled. My daughter, they worked a dog. She was 12, Jason was 14, and John-John was 18. They would go. John-John worked the elephants, put up the big top, the whole shebang. This one that's now with Cirque du Soleil, and he's not happy. He's not. I said to Armando today, "He needs to be here doing what you're doing. The hell with Cirque du Soleil, right?". But he lives in a suite hotel. They fly him around. You know, it's like, "Oh, mom." I'm like, "Well, this is pretty nice," you know. Like I don't like it. I wish he'd be back on the circus, you know? He's financially stable and everything, but it's like whatever. What does that mean? When the day comes and you say goodbye, what does that mean?

[01:01:00] We've never been money people.

[01:01:30] It's just that you go through so much, and these people, the animal activists, they don't realize at all how we live, or what we feel, or what we do, or what we go through, or what we sacrifice for that. You know, it's like even Carson & Barnes. I had to fight with them. They were old school. Old school, Mister Miller. I went there and I said, "Where's the sawdust?". "Sawdust? What do you mean sawdust?" It's like, "Well, the horses have to saw sawdust." "Really?" I was like, "Yeah. You know, like we're going to fill these trucks up with sawdust." We had like three horse trucks. Had the bareback horses and the liberty horses and the camels. "Oh, well. We don't put sawdust." I said, "Yeah, we do. We are going to put sawdust."

[01:02:00] They were so cheap that they would send me with the guys. I was in charge of the department. I was a woman. I ran all these guys. We'd take the pick up trucks and we would drive to the saw mill in Idabel, which is about 50 miles from Hugo, Oklahoma, and bag up the sawdust from the saw mill and bring it back. They wouldn't even like go to Tractor Supply and buy like a load of sawdust, right? Then I said to the guy, or Geary Bird, Mister Geary ... do you know know who Geary Bird?

LaVahn Hoh: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[01:02:30] Laura Herriott : Geary Bird and I didn't get along. Geary Bird says, he says, "Laura, you can come

- [01:03:00] over and look at these horse trucks." Mind you, I have three kids. I'm broke. This is my job. I'm struggling in life, really struggling. He says, "Come and look at these horse trucks." He says, "Okay." I go and I look at the horse trucks, and I was like, "Wow," way not up to par. He says, "Well, what do you think?," and I said, "Well, do you have any hand grenades? Because that's what they need. Let's blow them up with a hand grenade." I said ... They're open sided, like hauling pigs to market trucks.
- [01:03:30] They were old school. They were like old school. Mind you, the horses were fat as ticks. I have never seen fatter elephants or horses anywhere than on Carson & Barnes. Elephants were roly poly fat, and the horses were too. They weren't afraid to feed them, and they knew how to feed them. I was like, "There should be rubber on the floor. Where's the rubber?" The little horses, they had a double deck thing where the little horse had to go up the ramp and up here, and then someone under here, and then other ones went over here. It was open. They weren't closed. I was like, "Really?".
- [01:04:00] Well, Mister DR Miller went and bought a bridge, a bridge. There was a bridge somewhere that they like tore it down and built a new bridge. It was a little bridge. He went and got trucks and equipment, and he bought this bridge. It had steel, and it had rubber, because somewhere when they make the, I did not know that, but when they make a road, some places there's rubber in between like layers there. This bridge had rubber. It was the heaviest rubber I ever saw in my life, but he didn't care, because they had 10,000 men to put it. They put that rubber on the
- [01:04:30] floor of the horse trucks. It's like, "Okay."
- LaVahn Hoh: Let me ask you another question. Do you have a funny story that happened while you were on the Ringling show?
- Laura Herriott : God, Donna.
- LaVahn Hoh: This should really open up the ...
- Laura Herriott : A funny story.
- Donna Ward: Like during the circus?
- LaVahn Hoh: When you were with Ringling, yeah.
- [01:05:00]
- Donna Ward: Well, on a personal level I was just talking about it the other day, when I came home late and I left my key to the girls car.
- Laura Herriott : God, yeah.
- Donna Ward: You know, I'm blonde. I was born blonde, so I still do blonde things. Well, I never have much.

Laura Herriott : She's a true blonde.

Donna Ward: Yeah. I figured, you know, I figured I won't worry about it. I go to ... my boyfriend and I go out, who later became my husband. We go somewhere. I don't know where we were. We come back, everybody's asleep and I don't have my key. Well, my girlfriend who's going to be here, she is across the train. We're in the girls' car. My bed's on this side and her bed's on that side. I tell my husband, I'm like, "Just let me get on your shoulders, and I'm going to get up to the window, and I'm going to call Rebecca." "Rebecca, Rebecca, open the door. Rebecca." Well, the windows, remember you rolled them up so they were the glass? It went like this. I'm holding on to that top one, and you're on a hill on a railroad track. My husband, he worked concessions. He wasn't an acrobat, so he's like, "Whoa." I am falling. As I'm falling, I bring all the glass out. The glass goes and hits all the glass on the way down. Crash, bang, blast. I'm like, "Oh, no," and everybody wakes up. You see all the lights coming on now.

[01:05:30]

[01:06:00]

Laura Herriott : Oh, my God.

[01:06:30]

Donna Ward: I'm like, "I'm in trouble." Finally they let me in. Well, it's snowing. It was cold time of the year. Well, the train master is who else, my uncle.

Laura Herriott : He was a grumpy butt old man.

Donna Ward: I tell my uncle, "Will you please? My window broke." You know, he said, "How'd your window break?"> you know, I'm honest.

Laura Herriott : He heard the story I'm sure.

Donna Ward: Yeah. He's like, "Well, yeah. I'll get around too fixing it." He took weeks to fix that. It would snow. I would come home and there was snow on my bed. I would like, "Becky, can I get in your bed?".

[01:07:00]

Laura Herriott : Teaching you a lesson.

Donna Ward: Yeah, yeah.

Laura Herriott : Well, I thought of one. I'm sure there's so many then. I'll be like, "Oh, God, why didn't I tell about that one or this one." Myself personally, we're in New York City in Madison Square Garden. I'm like 15 years old girl, so we go shopping and I buy a wig, beautiful, full, human hair hairpiece, right?

[01:07:30]

Donna Ward: Right, yeah.

Laura Herriott : Well, later on I became a world class expert at putting wigs on, because I went up and did I think it was the hanging perch. Was it the hanging perch? No, it was the-

Donna Ward: Ladder?

Laura Herriott : It was web, because it was the 100th anniversary unit.

Donna Ward: Did you ever do the Hill Dolly thing?

Laura Herriott : Yeah, I did that one.

Donna Ward: That was a perch, the Hill Dolly that rolled around.

Laura Herriott : This was the next year.

Donna Ward: Yeah.

Laura Herriott : [01:08:00] It was the blue show. I was going out with Rubin. We went down the street and I found this wig, and I bought this wig, and I was beautiful. I put that wig on and I went in and did web, and my guy, I can't remember who was my web sitter at the time. It depended. I was a swing girl as a web girl.

Donna Ward: You'd go where-

Laura Herriott : [01:08:30] Which was very hard, because I had to work with all the different guys. Like Bridget and Gaza got in a big fight, and then Gaza was my ... then remember the clown, Zapata? Zapata was a horrible web sitter. He was a clown. That was when I was there in '74 though. We rode in with big Indian headdresses, and he was a clown so he wore the thing through his head. He was a fantastic clown, Zapata. He had the ... Hey, there he is. I said we're going to come and see you.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: What the? I think we're all grown ups. What the hell are you doing here?

Donna Ward: Hi, Heavy. How are you?

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: Good to see you. And this-

Donna Ward: Good to see you.

Laura Herriott : I told Frank. I said, "We're going to come down."

LaVahn Hoh: Heavy just walked in.

[01:09:00]

Laura Herriott : We're not done with our interview. This poor man can't get a word in edgewise with us.

Donna Ward: He hasn't asked us any questions. We've been here two hours.

LaVahn Hoh: I'm enjoying it.

Harold "Heavy" : How are you? You're a saint. I'm going to shake your hand. What's new?

Burdick:
 LaVahn Hoh: They're just telling a lot of good stories.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: They are? I know they're all true.

Laura Herriott : Nothing happening but the rent, Heavy. I'm retired now you know.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: You're not performing?

Laura Herriott : Nope. I sold everything.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: Shit.

Laura Herriott : Yeah.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: Well, you've done it long enough.

Laura Herriott : Yeah, well. I sold myself out of business now. I don't know what I'm going to do
 [01:09:30] with myself. You know, it's hard. It's kind of weird. I'm like, "Okay." Fernando works.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: Could you get me a glass of water out of that fountain as long as you're right there, hun?

Donna Ward: I certainly can.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: I sure appreciate it.

Donna Ward: I certainly would hope so. Is that cold water?

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: Is your other sisters here or no?

Laura Herriott : Wiener's coming.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: Wiener is.

Laura Herriott : Heidi's doing a fair in Valparaiso, Indiana, and Cindy's here.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: Let me sit down there, Donna. Cindy's here? Geez, I haven't seen you for a long time.

Laura Herriott : It's been a few years.

Harold "Heavy"
 Burdick: But I haven't seen Cindy since she was here last.

[01:10:00]
 Laura Herriott : Yeah. Yeah.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: Heidi is here all the time. Jesus Christ.

Laura Herriott : It's been a few years, yeah.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: I see her all the time.

Laura Herriott : Heidi's not your favorite anyhow. I'm your favorite.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: You're damn right. I'll tell her so too. If not, you tell her, all right? This one here, good to see you though.

Donna Ward: Good to see you.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: Still doing the dogs?

Donna Ward: Yeah. Yeah, still doing dogs.

Speaker 5: I want to hear the end of that story.

Laura Herriott : [01:10:30] Okay. Well, we rode in with Indian headdresses, and Zapata was a hysterical Mexican clown, comes from a fantastic circus family. He wore the thing through his head. I'm up there doing ... would be up there doing web, and the web would go like all loose, and he'd be like over entertaining the kids, making them laugh while the web number was on. He was bad. The girls would refuse to work with him, so they threw me in there because I like had experience. We're in Madison Square Garden, and I get the wig and I'm strutting my ... I'm looking good, right? I go up the web, and like I said I can't remember who my web sitter was, but spun the hell out of me, and the wig went-

[01:11:00]

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: No shit.

Laura Herriott : [01:11:30] Like all around. It made a circle, because it had centrifugal force. That was like one of my most memorable. I did it here too, at the Circus World Museum, but that was my Madison Square moment, diva moment.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: There you go.

Laura Herriott : [01:12:00] I learned how to tie that wig on. I taught my daughter. She wears wigs and she does cloud swing, and her wig won't come. I could have done a hair hang with that in my wig. I did it here. I was like 13 or 14, and I rode American Anthem, the dressage horse. I was a good rider when I was a young girl. I went and bought a little hairpiece. I don't know where I bought it. It was like curls, all curls. I rode in on the horse and the hairpiece fell off. My father goes and gets a shovel. Frankie Brown will remember this.

Donna Ward: No way.

Laura Herriott : He gets a shovel and he goes in the ring and waits for me to ride by. Now my hair is

like in a little thing or something. He picks it up with a shovel, and then he holds it up to me like, "You want this?". Oh, my God. That was bad.

Donna Ward: How humiliating.

Laura Herriott : That was bad.

[01:12:30]

Donna Ward: I remember one time with the 100th anniversary, I had this dress. Remember?

Laura Herriott : Yes, yes.

Donna Ward: It had all that net.

Laura Herriott : Yes.

Donna Ward: It was kind of hard. It was all net. I go out and do everything.

Laura Herriott : I know what you're going to say.

Donna Ward: I get back to the dressing room. Here comes Charlie Bowman with a bra. Guess whose bra it was?

Laura Herriott : Your bra, the bra was hooked to the dress. Yeah.

Donna Ward: Hooked to the skirt.

Harold "Heavy"
Burdick: Oh, no.

Laura Herriott : All of the girls have had that happen.

Donna Ward: Who knows how long I danced out there-

Laura Herriott : A lot of girls, yep.

Donna Ward: With a bra flying around off of my skirt.

Laura Herriott : Yep, yep.

LaVahn Hoh: What did Charlie say?

[01:13:00]

Donna Ward: I never told him who it was. I played dumb.

Laura Herriott : We used to be ... on the 100th anniversary spec, they had cowboys and cowgirls. It was every section. There were different sections. There was the Annie Oakley. Lilimon was Annie Oakley. Then there was all the way down to my mother rode the ... well, it was Evie Althoff and then the next year was my mother. We were the

[01:13:30] golden girls, right, dancing. Charlie Bowman was the performance director, and nobody has respect for him. There was a club they called the Mickey Mouse Club. Remember the Mickey Mouse Club?

Donna Ward: Yeah. I know.

Laura Herriott : It was a group of guys.

Donna Ward: Elvin.

Laura Herriott : There was a group of guys, young guys that were big stars on the show, and they pulled pranks, always doing pranks. Stevenson boys, Elvin Bale, Ray Cuddy.

Donna Ward: The motorcycle guy.

Laura Herriott : Rubin.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: I can't remember nothing. These guys remember.

Donna Ward: The guy that went on the motorcycle.

Laura Herriott : Yes, yes, yes.

Donna Ward: I forget his name. They all had their little model cars. Remember they had the little cars?

[01:14:00]

Laura Herriott : They'd do pranks, like serious pranks. Then were just make-

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: Life miserable, huh?

Laura Herriott : Charlie Bowman's life a hell. I mean they did really bad stuff to him.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: I bet it was fun though.

Laura Herriott : We used to laugh at Charlie Bowman, because he was German, and he'd say, "Cowboy boys and cowboy girls, let's go. Let's go." They had glockenspiels. Remember the glockenspiels?

Donna Ward: I know the glockenspiels.

Laura Herriott : "Let the bells ring out. It is a glorious day."

[01:14:30]

Donna Ward: All these guys had to learn how to play an instrument, but we didn't find out.

Laura Herriott : "It is a long, long way to a drink."

Donna Ward: Yeah, yeah.

Laura Herriott : Charlie Bowman would say, "Glockenspiels, glockenspiels. Let's go, glockenspiels." The guys would say, "What, Charlie? What?". "Glockenspiels!" He wasn't funny, Charlie Bowman.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: That poor soul must have had it tough.

Laura Herriott : But let me tell you something, that's a great moment in circus history for me in my lifetime when that tiger say on that mirror ball.

Donna Ward: Beautiful.

Laura Herriott : They played Shangri La, and that mirror ball turned.

[01:15:00]

Donna Ward: The spotlights hit that ball.

Laura Herriott : The tiger looked like he was reaching for those-

Donna Ward: Slow motion.

Laura Herriott : For those sparkles.

Donna Ward: It was beautiful.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: Really?

Laura Herriott : Charlie Bowman would just have his whip like that.

Donna Ward: Yeah. You'd only see the tiger. He'd be going like this.

Laura Herriott : Then he'd back up and the tiger would grab him and lick his hair. My dad used to say, "All the ladies in these seats are dreaming that they're that tiger," because he was handsome. He was such a handsome man.

Donna Ward: Yeah. That was beautiful.

[01:15:30]

Laura Herriott : That was beautiful. My dad's favorite song and one of my favorite artists was Charlie Chaplin. Charlie Chaplin wrote a song called Limelight, Terry's theme from Limelight. I know the whole song. I can sing the whole song.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: I'll bet.

Laura Herriott : It was Joe Guzman and Monique.

Donna Ward: Yeah, that two was part of the Mickey Mouse Club.

- Laura Herriott : He was part of the Mickey Mouse.
- Donna Ward: He was part of the Mickey Mouse Club.
- Laura Herriott : He'd go up the motorcycle on the high wire, and they'd stop that motorcycle and the lights would go spotlight, and they would play that song, Terry's theme from
[01:16:00] Limelight. My dad would just, oh God, he loved that. That was like his favorite. Nowadays, like Cirque du Soleil or so many shows now, the Ringling Bros Circus, the last ones in the last years, there were no moments. When Dolly Jacobs came out with her cape, it was like nobody walked with a cape like Dolly Jacobs, except there was a lady.
- Donna Ward: But look at Unus when she'd flip that web.
- Laura Herriott : Vicky Unus.
- Donna Ward: She'd flip that web.
- [01:16:30]
- Laura Herriott : When she came down the web, she'd come down the web with high heels on.
- Donna Ward: Yeah, high heels.
- Laura Herriott : She'd come down hand over hand after she just did one arm swings, and she'd hit the ground and she took that web and threw that web.
- Donna Ward: Boom. It was beautiful.
- Laura Herriott : When I was there in Houston, in Houston, Texas, Vicky Unus would be up there working and Jeanette Williams, who was at that time a very rude person, and my dad and these people would be standing waiting to go in with the liberty horses.
[01:17:00] The liberty horses followed Vicky Unus aerial ballet. I was in the aerial ballet. Vicky Unus was a freaking star.
- Donna Ward: Yeah.
- Laura Herriott : She did a handstand in the rings. She did an iron cross. She did one arm swings. She rolled up the web.
- Harold "Heavy" Burdick: Really? Wow.
- Laura Herriott : Nowadays they do lira and chiffon, lira and chiffon.
- Harold "Heavy" Burdick: You don't see that for a long time.
- Laura Herriott : She rolled up the web and came down hand over hand after she did how many one arm swings. Now Vicky Unus-

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: What's wrong with the business today? It ain't like it should be.
 [01:17:30]
 Laura Herriott : Vicky Unus complained, and she said, "I'm up there working." Lilian Leitzel's rigging, the thing crystallized and she fell down and died, Lilian Leitzel. Vicky Unus is doing that act, and she said when she's up there working, she can hear people talking like down on the ground. She said, "Please don't let people stand under me talking, because I don't know if they're saying stop, come down, whatever," right?

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: Yeah, yeah. Oh, God.
 Laura Herriott : She wasn't a temperamental person.

Donna Ward: No.
 [01:18:00]
 Laura Herriott : She was crazy as hell, but she wasn't a temperamental person.

Donna Ward: She was a star.

Laura Herriott : They wouldn't stop, and it was Jeanette and Gunther. My dad said they'd be starting there waiting to go with the liberty horses. I'll never forget it. It was Houston, and I don't know how many she did. I want to say 75, maybe 100.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: Holy shit.
 Laura Herriott : She did that.

Donna Ward: She could do 100.
 [01:18:30]
 Laura Herriott : Well, now they're saying, "65, 66, 67," like in a movie. Now Jeanette Williams and all these people that are blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, everybody stops in the building and people are standing up and they're counting. This woman is doing these one arm swings. She came down, she threw that web, and she was like Cher said, "Follow that, you bitches."

Donna Ward: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Laura Herriott : You know, like Cher. You know the Cher concert?

Donna Ward: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Laura Herriott : She said, "Well, they're all out there to get me."

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: See you guys.

Donna Ward: We'll see you later, Heavy.

Harold "Heavy" Burdick: See you later. Oh, God.

[01:19:00]
 Laura Herriott : It was like that moment. She was like, "You're not going to pay attention to me? I'll make you pay attention to me." I was there. It was incredible.

Donna Ward: Wow.

Laura Herriott : Incredible. Well, I hope we didn't talk your arm off and make you crazy.

LaVahn Hoh: No. I want to go another two or three hours.

Laura Herriott : It's such a pleasure. It's such a pleasure. I love my industry so much and my family, her family, circus people. It's just my soul. It's my life. It's my being. Now it's so hard for me, because I'm like, "What do I do? What do I do?". I can train horses and I could do this and that and the other thing. I'm only 61, but my health is deteriorating, so it's really hard. It's like my daughter, I live through her, vicariously through her. She's out there doing it. Sometimes I go and work with her. She was on the Soul Circus, UniverSoul Circus.

[01:19:30]

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

[01:20:00]
 Laura Herriott : She's very ethnic looking, my daughter. My husband was half Mexican. She's dark, very beautiful girl, and she really does look like Kim Kardashian, doesn't she?

Donna Ward: Yes.

Laura Herriott : When you walk in the mall with her-

Donna Ward: Beautiful. You just stop. Gorgeous.

Laura Herriott : People turn around and look at her like, "Is that her?". She does, like I said, dogs and she can do it all. She does cloud swings. She did a beautiful cloud swing, did dislocations and everything. I live vicariously through her. When she was on Soul Circus, I actually went on the road with them and my grandson. She has a little son. That's my life. I backed up the ring for her. I put on a black suit and I would back for the zebras, because she's probably the only woman. They had performing zebras on Ringling and Karen Hook presented them, but Jenny, it's just her zebra was fabulous. She looks so fabulous. She wears that wardrobe with the feathers and the peasant feathers and zebra, and she's just amazing. The zebras all stop and come up to her. Let me tell you something. UniverSoul Circus, have you seen it?

[01:20:30]

[01:21:00]

LaVahn Hoh: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Laura Herriott : It's so high energy and so loud. It blew my mind every day. I'm an animal trainer

- [01:21:30] and I was like I would have to be like, "You need to settle down, turn the music down a little bit." Mister Cedric Walker ... when you're in your motor home, my daughter has a big bus, we're in the bus and the bus is like vrrr, vrrr, like when you're at the corner and those guys go by with those ... and the zebras had to go in, march into the back door first of all, through all the people that are ... the props or the dressing rooms are there. There's like Caribbean people and all these Chinese people. They don't know and they don't care, and they're doing flip flops and somersaults.
- [01:22:00] I'd walk up through there. I'd be like, "Okay, everybody. Settle down. Calm down please. Quiet please. The zebras are coming." Well, they'd march with the six zebras through that. Then they'd get to the back, the side wall. Well, they have that open. Then she's go straight into the dark, and they put a fence, like a little corral, but the front of it was the doors. Like they don't have a curtain. They have like those doors that open, right? Now the zebras go and they stand. Jenny turns around and the guys, they turn around. Now their back is to the door and the six zebras are facing them.
- [01:22:30] I can never tell you how dangerous zebras are. They're absolutely so dangerous, and they're so powerful. The guy would close the fence, and they'd go in there, and they'd stand there and hold them. They'd try to go at the last minute. Then they'd unsnap them all, all six, and she'd lay the ropes over the fence, and she'd come around and come out and come around the side, because she's got to enter. The last thing the ringmaster would say, something about, "Are you having a good time? Scream!," and the people would scream. Then they'd say, "Really? Scream again! Well now comes the Soul Circus zebras," and the people'd like, "Rah!".
- [01:23:00] They'd open the curtain, and the zebras go up a ramp, like up a ramp into the ring. The ring's up here. Like it sits up like a stage. Then Jenny would come in behind them, and they'd close the doors, and she'd go in there and wave the whip and present them. But it was like to me, the entrance and the exit was like, "What are you doing?" The ring was the easy part. Getting in and out was ...
- [01:23:30]
- [01:24:00] In Philadelphia, two zebras escaped and they ran all over. One they caught right away. The other one was one that didn't perform and it was just a young zebra that they were going to replace one with and so forth. He got out. They were tearing down the tent, and they moved them around to the other side. Somebody threw something, something came flying through there. The ones she was holding, two of them, they took off. The whole Soul Circus is fenced in. They went around the tent, through the concessions, and out the front door, the only way they possibly could escape. Like how did that happen?
- [01:24:30]
- Donna Ward: Yeah.
- Laura Herriott : They caught one right away, and the other one ran pretty far. It was huge. For my daughter, it's a liability of epic proportion and it's her insurance, her USDA license, 1000%. They got a helicopter. The news people are there and all this, right? The zebra runs about, I don't know, four miles or something. Larry Carden is the elephant trainer. Well, Jenny's running. Her and her boyfriend, they're running,
- [01:25:00]

[01:25:30] chasing the zebra. Larry Carden goes with his pickup, and he gets up alongside the zebra. It's like a miracle. He jumps out and he gets the zebra, and he's got it. Well, now he's driving a pickup and the zebra's going fast, so the news people and the police and all that kind of lost him, lost him, right? Now, Lance comes, my daughter's boyfriend, with a van from the Soul Circus. He brings the van. They get the zebra. He jumps into the side of the van, like a miracle.

Donna Ward: A miracle. A miracle.

Laura Herriott : It's a miracle. If you wanted the zebra to get in the van, you'd spend two days trying to get it. He jumped in the van. Now the van goes back, and the news people are all there and everybody. They're all looking, and the police and everything. Mind you, thank Jesus the zebra didn't hurt anyone or the zebra didn't have to be euthanized. No one got hurt, not a scratch on the zebra. It was like a miracle. He got in the van, and they took him back to the circus. Now the people were like, "Oh, well he's back already. They already got him," but it was epic, like, "Oh, God." She was like, "I got to quit, mama. I can't do this anymore." I said, "Okay. I know how you feel."

[01:26:00]

Donna Ward: Yeah.

Laura Herriott : But that's just ...

LaVahn Hoh: We've gone an hour and a half.

[01:26:30]

Laura Herriott : Good.

LaVahn Hoh: This is amazing.

Donna Ward: God, I'm so sorry.

Laura Herriott : We're holding you up.

LaVahn Hoh: No. You're not holding me up. I would stay here and talk some more.

Laura Herriott : It's a pleasure. I'm just enjoying so much to have a conversation with someone who's learned-

Donna Ward: Yeah, that's the way I feel.

Laura Herriott : On the facts, and that it's been your life's work to study this. I so appreciate that, and there's so much.

Donna Ward: That we have a voice.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Laura Herriott : I want to write a book. I want to write a book. I'm not a writer. I have a lot of

- [01:27:00] passionate things to say. My father was a great writer, and he has two manuscripts that we've never had published, and nothing about the circus. The books are not about the circus.
- LaVahn Hoh: Well, I finally years ago got an email from Heidi thanking me for what I was doing with the circus course. Then I finally met her about three years ago at The Showfolks.
- Laura Herriott : I was unaware. I'll keep on top of it. Now I want to know what's going on.
- [01:27:30]
Donna Ward: In your classes, I'm interested to know if you cover ... I think that the women in the circus were true liberated women.
- LaVahn Hoh: Yes.
- Laura Herriott : Beyond a shadow of a doubt.
- LaVahn Hoh: Yes.
- Donna Ward: You know, I think we did things that no other woman at the time-
- Laura Herriott : I agree so much. I'm so happy you brought that up, because like I said, I was a single mother. She was a single mother. My husband wasn't a circus man, has owned a circus for 25 years. I never ... we're the original. Lilian Leitzel or Vicky Unus, we didn't need validation. I always laugh. It sounds very ignorant, but I'm sorry, it's true. I think it's funny when people like sexual harassment.
- [01:28:00]
Donna Ward: Yes.
- [01:28:30]
Laura Herriott : Not sexual like grab me. Don't dare do that, but like we've lived in a good ole boys, very glamorous. We want around with bikinis on and eyelashes and makeup. I always thought if the producer didn't say something to me, I wouldn't say sexual harass me, but-
- Donna Ward: It's another world.
- Laura Herriott : I would feel like I was losing my edge. Not flirt. Do you understand what I'm saying?
- [01:29:00]
Donna Ward: No, but you work so hard and you know how important looks are. It's kind of like-
- Laura Herriott : I would handle sexual harassment with no problem.
- Donna Ward: We were strong enough to say, "Excuse me."
- Laura Herriott : Exactly.

- Donna Ward: Yeah, "Excuse me."
- Laura Herriott : No problem. You've be so embarrassed.
- Donna Ward: To a certain point.
- Laura Herriott : If some man sexually harassed me, I've had it happen I think, but I wouldn't ... they would walk away scratching their head, and the next time they spoke to someone they'd have a little more manners.
- [01:29:30]
- Donna Ward: I think the reason that we are like that is because we are so confident. I think that we're not afraid in life. We're not afraid like, "Oh, we've got to keep working, because if the circus shut." You know, we know you're going to go find a job somewhere, else. I'm not afraid. I'm going to find a job anywhere else. I've worked-
- Laura Herriott : "You may be with a show you knowledge may fold. You may be stranded out in cold."
- Donna Ward: "In the cold."
- Laura Herriott : "But I wouldn't trade it for a sack of gold. Let's go on with the show."
- Donna Ward: "Let's go on with the show." You know, in the circus, and I never realized this because I'd always been in it, but when I came off of the circus, and I have owned seven grooming shops so I've hired a whole lot of people, been very successful in the industry, but I never knew people called in sick. I never knew people didn't show up.
- [01:30:00]
- Laura Herriott : Right. I know, yeah.
- Donna Ward: I didn't know that.
- Laura Herriott : My dad was like that too, when he would run like a park. He worked at parks where he would put on the show, like the Land of Little Horses or the Pompano little horse farm, whatever. These kids call in sick. My dad would be so mad. He's like, "Call in sick?".
- [01:30:30]
- Donna Ward: It's a real game changer. You are taught, and you don't even know it, you are taught to be responsible. When you and I were little, when I was a little kid, seven years old on Gil Gray, it would be storming and lightning like it was yesterday, say the show just finished.
- Laura Herriott : We were trained.
- Donna Ward: We never. My mom never said, "Donna, come into the trailer. It's cold."

Laura Herriott : We ran for our lives. We were trained.

Donna Ward: We had to feed those horses, blanket those. It was us kids who-

[01:31:00]

Laura Herriott : But I mean if there was a storm, we better be accounted for. We wouldn't be like, "Well, go find your sister." Oh, no. Uh-uh. When you were ... my grandson is a toddler, and my daughter of course she can't take care of him as well as I could.

Donna Ward: Never.

Laura Herriott : But you put him by the band in their little chair in their little, what do you call that? Your stroller. You put the child there and you say, "You sit there," and the band leader's watching, and the other mothers are watching. My friend is coming for the trapeze, and she's going to take the baby, but for that few minutes, "You sit there. Do not move out of that chair. If you move out of that chair, a lion or tiger is going to get you, an elephant's going to run over you, the horses are going to stomp you, or somebody is going to steal you." Those days, we didn't even think about that.

[01:31:30]

Donna Ward: You know, your kids knew you were serious. There was certain danger.

Laura Herriott : Yeah, there was no option, no option.

Donna Ward: But they knew, "Hey, my mom is serious about this."

[01:32:00]

Laura Herriott : Family wise, it's incredible. We are a family. We had jobs. We all did a job, and there was no generation gap. There's no generation gap in the circus. There is not.

Donna Ward: Everybody has a job.

Laura Herriott : The young kids, which there's a lot of European people so their culture is a little different than our culture too, but the grandmas and the grandpas, they're to be respected and they are there. They teach you to do somersaults, or they teach you to ride a horse, or they teach you, and you respect your grandmother and grandfather. You don't ever be like, "Oh, God. Here comes the old people. Whatever," you know?

[01:32:30]

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Laura Herriott : Absolutely not. Do you have children?

LaVahn Hoh: I do.

Laura Herriott : You do.

LaVahn Hoh: I have one daughter, yep.

Laura Herriott : Yeah.

Donna Ward: You know, just for me being included-

Laura Herriott : It's just such an incredible way.

Donna Ward: Another thing that I learned that I didn't know I learned because I always knew it is I accept people. You know, we learned as kids if I said something derogatory about a little person as a kid, my mother, I'd have woke up in the next town. You know, and you dealt with so many people. People that were homosexual.

[01:33:00]

Laura Herriott : Races, creeds, colors, sexual orientation.

Donna Ward: Came from different ... you know.

Laura Herriott : We knew about gay people. Our whole life I was like, "Really? They want to get married? They don't want to get married. They're not going to stay married."

Donna Ward: But it doesn't feel ... we are more accepting of that.

Laura Herriott : "Really? Come on."

Donna Ward: It's like it's taken the world to catch up with us now as far as a little more accepting.

Laura Herriott : I've known gay couples.

[01:33:30]

Donna Ward: I'm not promoting it, but I'm accepting of it.

Laura Herriott : Mister Harold Ronk and Mister Robert Harrison were gay men, and they were partners their whole ... my whole life, ever since I knew them when I was a young girl. You knew before I did, and we knew. I knew they were gay.

Donna Ward: We didn't even know really what it meant.

Laura Herriott : We didn't know. You know, we knew they were. We knew.

Donna Ward: Yeah. We either liked them, they were either nice to us just like everybody else.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Donna Ward: You judged them on how you were treated.

[01:34:00]

Laura Herriott : My dad, I have to say to get down to the nitty gritty, my dad would tell me, because I was in the girls' dressing room and I was a young little girl, "That girl's a lesbian," my dad would say. You know, like one thing is times have changed whereas gay guys are not child molesters. That isn't even ... that bothers me. Yes, there is the

- [01:34:30] teacher or the whatever or the priest. Yes, there's bad circus animal trainers. There's bad nuclear power plants. There's bad, but generally we didn't ... and there were. There were absolutely. I can say there was one clown that was a giant clown that the whole world knew that he was a bad man.
- [01:35:00] My father would tell us girls, there was four of us little girls, and my father was like ... and of course you hire transient people that come off the street. They're escaping something. They're not from the circus. They're not circus families. They're guys from the town that just got out on probation and blew town, and there were child molesters, and there were murders, and rapists. Absolutely there were, and that was a big worry. When I had my little boys, oh man, I was tough. I'm afraid my sons are a little bit homophobic. They're adult men and I'm like, "Guys, come on," you know? But they're ... Well, we'd better go find our life here, Donna, and see what we're doing. We're supposed to be on the square right at-
- [01:35:30]
- LaVahn Hoh: Five o'clock.
- Laura Herriott : 5:00 or 6:00.
- LaVahn Hoh: Something like that.
- Laura Herriott : It's been such a pleasure to meet you guys.
- Donna Ward: I'm so sorry we talked your little ear off.
- LaVahn Hoh: No. What's interesting about your talk, I have her I don't know how many questions. You've covered almost all of them.
- Laura Herriott : Good.
- LaVahn Hoh: Just in you were going from one topic to another.
- Laura Herriott : If there's anything else you want to know ...
- [01:36:00]
- LaVahn Hoh: I want to spend more time talking with you guys. This has been interesting.
- Laura Herriott : It's great.
- Donna Ward: Thank you.
- Laura Herriott : It just means so much, and I'm so impressed. Like I said, I had no idea that you had this class.
- LaVahn Hoh: I've written a book about it, about the-
- Donna Ward: What's the name of the book?

Laura Herriott : You have?

LaVahn Hoh: It's called Step Right Up: the Adventure of Circus in America.

Donna Ward: We're going to have to read that.

Laura Herriott : Oh, my God. I'm going to read that right away.

LaVahn Hoh: You can get it on Amazon really cheap, because it's out of print.

Laura Herriott : Okay. Okay.

Donna Ward: Okay, very good.

LaVahn Hoh: Yeah.

Donna Ward: I will do that.

Laura Herriott : Amazing.

Speaker 5: 5:00 to 7:00, evening on Al Ringling.