

CWM Audio 70-9

Barbara Pflughaupt Interview, July 22, 2017

Interview conducted by Nancy Davies

Nancy Davies: Oral history with Barbara Pflughaupt, on Friday July 22nd, 2017. Oh, 21. It's a Friday and it's in July, at the Ringling homecoming. There we go. Barbara, I am thrilled to talk with you. I have known you for years.

Barbara: Yes.

Nancy Davies: You were the, correct me if I'm wrong, the national public relations-

Barbara: Agency

[00:00:30]

Nancy Davies: Agency for Ringling Brothers, so you have amazing stories to tell. I was a local publicist, the Chicago publicist, and I learned so much from you. But tell me, just first, a little bit about coming to Ringling Brothers and what you did in that position.

Barbara: Sure. I had been working in film, doing a lot of movies. I released about 50 movies for different companies, and someone I worked with in L.A., who also worked on film, had the Ringling account in Los Angeles. He called me and said, "Ringling's looking for a publicist in New York." I said, "Ringling?" He said, "The circus." I went, "The circus? I'm working on movies with movie stars." He said, "Okay, but just go talk to them."

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[00:01:30] I stood on the arena floor and went nuts, because as a child, the two things I loved the most in life was live theater and large animals. I stood on the floor and went, "Oh, my God! They put them together." I never left. I never went back to film.

[00:02:00] I started working in the New York office and the first year was the 120th edition, with Flavio Togni. And I did Meadowlands, Nassau, Garden, Meadowlands. By the end of the second Meadowlands, I stood in the elephant area behind a pole as they moved out, hysterical crying. I was just dying that they were leaving. Mike Melson, who was the general manager at the time, saw me, came over, and said, "Honey, I know exactly how you feel. I was a promoter, and I couldn't stand them leaving, either." So, he became a general manager, and he went on the road. When Susannah Smith, who was the VP of marketing, asked me if I wanted to do the national publicity after the first year, I said, "Yes," because I knew that meant I could catch up with them.

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It was a joyous thing. I got to do the national publicity for 15 years. I left on my own in 2004, and in 2009, when they did the Coney Island Boomerang, a one-ring tented show for the whole summer in Coney Island, since I grew up in Brooklyn near Coney Island, they had asked me if I would handle that show. So, I came back. We did that summer,

[00:03:00] and that was the last opportunity I had to work with them, but never stopped loving everything about it.

Nancy How has Ringling changed your life?

Davies:

Barbara: Enormously. Enormously. As a movie publicist, or as corporate publicist, you have someone that does interviews, maybe you have some images or some video. I went nuts as a publicist. I had 900 people that I could call on. The most talented people in the world, doing things that no one else did. Color, lights, sound. Extraordinary human beings. It taught me what publicity could be. When you have all of that available to you that you can pitch, it's extraordinary what you can learn to do, because everyone says, "Yes."

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[00:04:00] I got to do a 48 Hours piece that took 18 months to tape. The producer went over to Russia with Tim Holst, hired acts, they filmed all of that. It was 18 months in production, a 20 minute piece. It was beautiful. It was my first fight with Kenneth Feld, because Mr. Feld said at the time, he said, "It's taking too long." And what they had said to me was,

[00:04:30] we had just opened Madison Square Garden, and they said, " We can either do the piece this week and it'll be five minutes, because we're booked, or if we can wait a week we can do the full thing." Kenneth wanted to do the five minutes. He said, "Let's just do it, because they were with us so long and who knows what they have." I said, "Please, the producer really loved us and I know it will be a beautiful piece." So, we fought a little bit, and what he said was, "You're the publicist, you make the decision." And I said, "Okay, we're going with the 20 minute one."

[00:05:00] Afterwards, he said to me that it was the best piece that was ever done. We had a great 14 years together, Mr. Feld and I. He was a wonderful man to work for because he respected what I did. He believed ... It took me like five years to really meet him. I did the job for a while, because I didn't want to meet him until he knew what my work was. I didn't want to just meet him.

Nancy Really, in five years, though.

Davies:

[00:05:30]

Barbara: Yeah, pretty much five years I think, before we ever really got together. It was because someone had written a terrible piece. No one wanted to show it to him. It was in the New York Times, and I showed it to him. He said, "What do you think of this?" I said, "I think it says more about him than it does about us." It was true. He saw bestiality. He saw S&M.

Nancy Oh, my gosh!

Davies:

[00:06:00]

Barbara: Because people were doing silk acts. So, I said, "It's really more about him than us. He didn't see our show. He saw what was in his head."

So, we had a great 14 years. He was very respectful. If I asked him for something it was almost always yes. We did Oprah Winfrey. Every publicist in America tries to pitch

Oprah, when Oprah was Oprah.

Nancy It was the time when it was the dream goal.

Davies:

[00:06:30]

Barbara:

Yes. There was no way I was going to get through. But, they came to us and said they wanted to surprise an audience member who had always wanted to be in the circus. She lived in Chicago. So, I said to Kenneth, "I need to be able to send Johnathan in costume to Chicago, surprise her, and then bring everybody back to Philadelphia." And he said, "Go ahead."

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I worked with the publicist. Johnathan went to Chicago, surprised the woman, came back to Philly, I called Phil McKinley, who was the director for, I think, seven circuses, and they were gorgeous, he was a brilliant, brilliant circus director. We brought her back to Philadelphia, he came in, redid the show so that she could be in the show. It was a great piece, and it was so much fun. It was my introduction to being able to do something like Oprah Winfrey, because corporate clients or whatever, that wouldn't have happened.

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It taught me what a one camera shoot or a two camera shoot is. I learned to produce TV, because they would say to me, "We want to get them backstage before they go into the arena, but I want to see them styling and being introduced." I said, "Okay." And they said, "Okay, well, we need two cameras. We need to set something up here, and we need to set something up here."

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So I learned, over time, I learned from NPR how to produce radio stories, how to produce pictures with just sound. I learned to put microphones in the tiger cages when they were being fed, so you could hear the growling and the roaring and all of that. We put lipstick mics and cams in cannons, so that you could paint a picture with just sound. I would never would have been able to learn that, or figure out how to do that, if I didn't have this amazing, amazing opportunity. It really did teach me to be a publicist.

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It made me lots of friends, because you know that as a publicist you can offer tickets and you can offer backstage tours. So, I made a lot of media friends, because I also had an Asian philosophy, sort of, about the show. I knew it was 130 odd years old, or 20, when I was doing it. I knew it would keep going. So, if someone didn't do something that year, but I brought them to the circus and I gave them special attention, they'd do it next year, and that's how it worked. I built relationships and I learned to do all sorts of things because, it opens up a world to a publicist that really, I feel sad that the show ended for that reason, too, is that there won't be anyone else that gets that opportunity.

[00:09:30]

Nancy

Davies:

As having worked as a publicist and worked with you, being the Chicago publicist for nearly four years, and what an experience, but what other publicists don't realize is, the demand that Ringling puts on you, and should. In the case of Chicago, as with New York and L.A., it sits for a month. You are tasked with, as I recall, two PR events a week, not to mention the one the month prior to when tickets go on sale.

Barbara: Advance-

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Nancy Let alone all of the other stories you need to get. Now, you have to do that year after
Davies: year after year, with yes, the show changes, but it's still circus.

Barbara: Yes.

Nancy It is a challenge. It is an exciting challenge.

Davies:

Barbara: It is.

Nancy How did you deal with that for 15 years coming up with these different angles and
Davies: stories?

Barbara: I think it really was a question of, I loved the show so much, and because I was the
[00:10:30] national publicist, I had the opportunity to live with them. I came to work every day in the arena. I met people between shows. I knew that not only do you do a tiger act, but you sang. Or you play the violin, or you do whatever. So, a lot of stories were about individuals and what you didn't see in the arena. I think that was a unique opportunity

[00:11:00] to be able to, every year, switch it up a bit. Change things so that there was something new, and that was newsworthy. Even if acts, a trapeze act might have been a trapeze act people have seen before, but the individuals doing it had stories. They were individuals with whole lives, 360 degrees. If you learned who they were and you learned a little bit about them and their family and things like that, you could do trapeze but tell a story with it, so that it changed it and it made it newsworthy.

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The hardest one, but we did really well on it was exciting, I did the Coney Island Boomerang in 2009 for them. It was a one-ring tented show in Coney Island for three months.

Nancy Oh.

Davies:

Barbara: I had to keep publicity going for three months.

Nancy In one city.

Davies:

Barbara: And we did, in once city, in one place, and we did it. We made them a lot of money that
[00:12:00] year. They did very well the first year with the Boomerang tour, and it was joyous. It was fun. I grew up in Coney Island. So, bringing it there, to Brooklyn, was amazing. I loved it. I loved it. I was very grateful to be asked back, because I left in 2004 on my own, and then in 2009, they said, "Alan and Hillary are still doing the big show. They're busy and we need to plan for this summer show." So, they brought me in and I loved it. It was great.

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Nancy Let's talk about their other one-ring show that went out, Kaleidescape.

Davies:
 Barbara: Yes. Kaleidescape.

Nancy See, it's been a few years. I had to stop myself, make sure I said it correctly. A beautiful-
 Davies:
 Barbara: Gorgeous.

Nancy Gorgeous show. What were some of the, I don't know, challenges and or gifts that were
 Davies: given to you with that show?

Barbara: They were gifts. They were gifts. That show would have, I think, run for years if planning
 [00:13:00] had gone into where they put it in major cities. It was in Bryant Park in New York. It was in the middle of New York City, and they had not had anything like that in years and years and years of tented show. It was beautiful. I was also given a really good budget, because was a high-end show. It was supposed to be a luxury show. At the time, journalists were able to do things they can't do now, but I was able to send a bottle of champagne to every single media outlet I wanted to invite, and tell them about this. Tell them that this was a luxurious circus that they had never seen before.
 [00:13:30]

[00:14:00] The acts in that show were stunning. I think Sylvia Zerbini may be one of the most beautiful, beautiful performers I have ever seen in my life. Her horse and aerial act was just the most beautiful thing in the world. When there was a movie, I forgot, recently, not Something For Circus?

Nancy I don't know.
 Davies:
 Barbara: I've forgotten the name of it. I always thought that the main character in the book, and in the movie, was based on someone like Sylvia, because, yeah, she is still one of the most beautiful performers anyone will ever see in their lives.

[00:14:30] So that show was a gift in that it was in the middle of New York, no one had seen a show like this, or been in a tented circus in a long time other than Big Apple. The luxury aspect of this. They didn't have porta-potties, they had built in bathrooms. There were all sorts of things that they did to make it a really luxurious experience.

Nancy I can give personal testament to those bathrooms. They were, I didn't even know that
 Davies: type of pop-up bathroom could exist. It was lovely.

Barbara: Yes. It was. And the show was beautiful. So, it wasn't that hard to sell, in that we also,
 [00:15:00] New York is a big market, it has a lot of media. So, we were able to do a lot of publicity and, as much of a challenge as it is to keep a show for a long time, if you have great performances and you know backstories, there's a lot you can do, and sort of teach people what's behind the scenes in a wonderful way. They get to see a beautiful show, but they get to know people who made this their life. And why they make this their life.
 [00:15:30] Why do you do something that's so hard to do and travel and live the way you do, and it's for the joy of that applause. It's for the joy of showing what a human being is capable of. It's why I still think that live shows will always be something that we need to see. I think it goes back to primitive, primordial need for social animals to be together to
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experience something.

[00:16:30] I'm sad that it's gone very much, because of the timing. For them, I think it was, you know well, it's a world of computers and phones and I still think people need to do this together, and that people aren't happy just watching things on a screen by themselves. It can be enjoyable, but there's nothing like the roar or a crowd around you when someone does a quadruple somersault.

Nancy It is different seeing it on video but seeing it live.

Davies:

Barbara: Yes. There's nothing like that live experience, because the people sitting next to you can feel their energy. You hear their clapping and gasps. Being a publicist standing in the vom and being able to look at people's faces. See babies, and their parents, and their grandparents and everyone enjoying it.

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Nancy I was sitting there once watching a high-wire act and the family behind me, the girl was probably seven or eight, and all through the high-wire she would, "Oh, no! Oh, no! Oh, no! Oh, no, look at that! Oh, no, look at that! Oh no, oh no, I hope he doesn't fall! Oh, this is so exciting!"

Davies:

Barbara: Yes. And that doesn't happen in video because everyone knows, you can splice it, you can cut it, you can edit it, you can blue-screen it, you know.

Nancy Yes.

Davies:

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Barbara: The person doesn't have to do those things now. In circus, in live performance, you're seeing a person, a human being doing something that they've studied their lives to do. They've practiced and rehearsed, and they're unbelievably talented. I think it really goes back to cavemen. We may be going through a phase where people are looked into their iPhones, or their iPads, or their iPods, or their computers, but I don't think that will last. I think people are starting, even now, to start to be overwhelmed by the technology, and the information coming at them. There's too much of everything. I really do think it's going to go back to, and it is in many ways.

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[00:18:30] What you are doing here is very much like The Moth on NPR. It's storytelling, and in New York, there are five venues now that are just storytelling venues. People getting up and telling their stories, or someone's story that's important to them. It's because people want to touch, hear, see other people, real live people.

Nancy I want to talk a little bit about some of the performers you've worked with. Who stands out in your mind?

Davies:

Barbara: Gunther Gebel-Williams. I didn't have the joy of working with Gunther in his prime, but I came in the year he retired. But, he's lived on the show and traveled with the show, because Mark Oliver, his son, took over his acts. Being with Gunther, animals for me are the greatest love of my life, and to be able to get into a tiger cage with Gunther Gebel-Williams and tigers-

[00:19:00]

Nancy Oh, wow.

Davies:

Barbara: Was beyond, yes, beyond anything I'd ever dreamed of. I think that's part of what circus gave me, is, as a child I thought about performing. I was an actress for a while, short period of time in my life. But, the idea of being able to experience this, and get into a tiger cage and be with elephants and blow into their trunks, because they know you and they know your breath, all of it.

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[00:20:00] So, Gunther, for me, may have been, because I grew up loving what he did, inspirational to be around. He was kind, and generous, and wonderful. One of the things I loved about him was, I would say, there was Showtime. Showtime wanted to do something with Mark Oliver and he just wasn't in the mood. He didn't want to do it. He went, "Eh, hmm." I went to Gunther, and I said, "Gunther, Showtime. People pay for that. It's money, Gunther." And he went, "Oh, we're doing it." So, he would make sure, anything I needed, Gunther never said no. Gunther said, "I'll figure it out." I would say, "Can we do this?" And he would say, "I'll figure out how."

Nancy Wow.

Davies:

Barbara: He was amazing. We did with ... Chipperfield, I'm forgetting his first name. How can I forget?

Nancy I know who you mean and I can't either.

Davies:

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Barbara: I know his brother's name. Graham. Graham Thomas Chipperfield. And Richard Chipperfield. Graham did an elephant act, and also like Gunther, was acrobatic. We brought three elephants, because of Gunther, to Los Angeles to do Jay Leno's show, and do a live act where he catapulted off a teeter board onto the elephants. It was an amazing experience to be able to things like that. After Gunther went, I couldn't anymore. No one would allow that stuff. He made it happen because, he also understood, it meant money, it meant ticket sales. To him, that's all that mattered. Nothing was impossible if it was going to sell tickets, if people would come to the show. He was amazing.

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[00:22:00] David Larible, introducing him to America. God, funny man. Funny, funny man. Not just as a clown, but a funny, wonderful man in so many ways. That was joyous. Sara Houcke, the tiger whisperer, this 20-something year old gorgeous blond that got into a tiger cage. I think my favorite quote from the circus, of my life, was when someone said to Sara, "Why would the cats do this? And why do you do this? Why do you get into that cage with tigers every day?" And she said, "The same reason they do. Meat and applause." I had that up on my desk. "I do it for meat and applause." She's right, you know. It's my living and I love it. She, there were so many. It's hard to really tell you. I mean, just-

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Nancy Let's talk about Michu.

Davies:

Barbara: Yes, well, I only had one tour, I think, with Michu, and didn't spend a lot of time with him. But, it was fun, and the sideshow was a great show. That was a real-

Nancy That was my first.

Davies:

Barbara: Yeah, that was a great deal of fun. The only piece, I think, that Glenn Collins didn't do for the New York Times. There was someone else that did it that year. I loved that show. It was really fun. I wasn't so in love with the giant man. He was a misogynist. He did not like women. So, it wasn't so much fun working with him. But, it was a fun show. I enjoyed all of it. Hard to really pick one. The 125th, the 127th, and the 131st, were probably my three favorite shows.

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The 131st was Johnathan Lee Iverson's introduction. It was the living carousel. It was a gorgeous show. Phil McKinley directed that show and Phil knew pyro. He loved pyro and so do I, so there was constantly flashing stuff going on, and it was great. It was wonderful. Johnathan and I are still extraordinarily close. I'm his Jewish mommy. I love him and his wife. He met his wife on the show and married her. They have two beautiful children that performed in the last two shows, I think.

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It was just everyone. I really loved meeting everyone. Lee Stevens, who is here for this reunion, was the first act I ever met. I was in Madison Square Garden setting up the show office in the back area where the animals were going to be, and Lee walked into the show office and went, "I need water." I went, "Okay, I'll find it." I didn't know yet what I had to do in my job. But, Lee and I became great friends, and his wife Judy, and his two grown sons now. I see them and just go, "Oh, my god! You were teeny little things!"

[00:25:30]

Yeah, there are just innumerable people. There's no way I could tell you because, living with the show, being able to go and it wasn't just one account. The way I ran my agency, my partner did all the movie and DVD stuff when I took on national for the circus. I did that and New Line Entertainment and that's all. So, I would go and spend weeks at a time, every single show, and when they were at Madison Square Garden, if I missed a show, it was unusual. I would go out every single show, nine packs every show. I would, on the weekends, bring fruit, different kinds of fruit that I knew the elephants could eat. I'd bring grapes, and cherries, and strawberries, and watermelon and things for them between shows, and get the pleasure of being able to because the elephant guys all knew that that was the love of my life. I would sit and meditate in that area when it was quiet, when no one was there. It would just sit by the elephants and just daydream.

[00:26:00]

Nancy

Did you have a favorite elephant?

Davies:

[00:26:30]

Barbara:

There were two, actually. Asia, Asia was just the most beautiful elephant I'd ever seen. Her lashes just went up forever. She was a pretty girl, and just sweet. A sweet elephant. She used to put her trunk out and I would blow into her trunk. And, King Tusk was my first real ability to be around one, and Jimmy Silverlake, his trainer and handler, used to let me muck out his stall.

[00:27:00]

Nancy Let you! Oh!

Davies:

Barbara: Yeah, I would do things like that because I wanted to. I would pull ring rubber. I wanted to know what everything was. I knew riggers and electricians. I wanted to know everyone. I really did. It was, I immersed in it. I think because most people don't get that opportunity, it was very different for me. I really did just, all of me, into it. I was able to pull out of it things that made it successful. I hope that people thought it was successful. We did a lot of national press. It was joyous. We did the Today Show for seven years, for an entire half hour. The 8:30- 9:00 slot-

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Nancy I bow down to you.

Davies:

[00:28:00]

Barbara: Thank you. Was all of us. It was two acts, two featured acts and all the bumpers, and weather spots, it was great. I loved it. Again, taught you so much about live TV. For a publicist, it's hard to really learn everything, and now, you know, media's insane. But, being able to be at live events, and film live events. I would stand behind the camera to see what they, I would ask to look in their lens first, because I wanted to know, what's the viewer seeing.

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We would rehearse things so they didn't miss tricks, because I used to notice that the directors, if they didn't know, and sometimes a trick took a long time to build up to their finale, to their finish. So, very often, they'd cut away just when the person was going to do the hardest thing. So, I would rehearse and talk to the directors at the Today Show, and say, "Okay, you need to pull in here because, that's the finish trick." So, you learned to produce radio, television, and it's a way of me teaching other people and the people I trained to be able to say, and when you media train someone it's the same thing, it's, "Okay, for print, you need an interview, you need images, you have to think about."

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[00:29:30] And, as a publicist, you know. If you're a good publicist, what they teach in school is not the same thing. They teach you to focus on your client, and what does your client want to see. Yeah, that's important and you get to that, but the first thing you need to focus on is, it's a newspaper, what do they need? Why would this be important to them? Why would their audience want to read this?

[00:30:00] If it's television, what is the moving picture? Not a talking head, not a still, what's moving? So, that you had to, and I do as a publicist, think first about who I'm pitching. Why would they care? Why would their audience care? What can I give them that makes their job easy? So, that's how I teach publicists, is the first thing you do is think

[00:30:30] about the media and what do they need to do the story you want them to do. All you can do is pitch it and then manage it. You don't get to decide what it is. I had a shrink once who said to me, "You should make shoes."

Nancy Why is that?

Davies:

Barbara: It's frustrating to not have control. I'm a control freak. He said to me at one point, he went, "You know, that is, that's a hard job. You should just make shoes and go, 'These

[00:31:00] are \$25, you want them or you don't.'" But as a publicist, you have to pitch the story, you have to manage it 18 months, for 48 hours of massaging the producer to know what you want her to know, focus on what you want her to focus on and what can you give her that's wonderful that will come out wonderful. It's a learning experience that publicists will not have anymore. It was a great learning experience. I thank Mr. Feld for it all the time.

[00:31:30]
Nancy
Davies: Speaking of not being able to get what you necessarily want when you pitch it, talk to me about who in what city, I'm thinking more critic, newspaper, that year after year might be the bane of your existence. And I, specifically, am thinking of someone in Chicago. Chris Jones, the theater critic, because he would write, sometimes it would be great, sometimes it would be you didn't even know what he was talking about, but you knew he didn't like it. He would interview Mr. Feld and they had, what appeared to me, this ongoing interesting relationship. Would he be one of those people that you just didn't know what you were going to get?

Barbara: I imagine, but in general, I was lucky I inherited some people. A woman named Debbie Lindy who worked in New York taught me a lot. She taught me and helped me, and I did
[00:32:30] that when I left, I spent two hours on the phone with Helen Nolton telling them every friend, every enemy, who they needed to be aware of, things like that. Debbie told me about Glenn Collins at the New York Times, which changed my life. Made that easy, because he loved circus and if you gave him a good story he would do it.

[00:33:00] I'm trying to think what would be the hardest. USA Today. The Lifeline columnist for USA Today, a woman named Arlene Vigoda I think, was an animal rights activist. She would not ever announce that the tour was going and do anything. It took me six years, but I kept at her and kept at her. I finally said, "You have no right. You've never been to a
[00:33:30] circus. You've never been backstage. You have no right to decide what we do is inappropriate." And I said, "Please let me bring you backstage. You don't have to watch the show if you don't want to, but I want to introduce you to the people that work with the animals." From that time on, she wrote about the circus every year. Six years of my life, but yes, because I was committed to telling her the truth.

[00:34:00] The animal rights agenda, unfortunately, is about money, it's about raising money. There are some groups that really do care about animals, but if you can say, "I love animals, and I won't ever go to a circus," well, then you can't talk about it. You can't say they don't do it right, because you don't know. You're just listening to telephone
[00:34:30] talk, or edited videos. There was a terrible situation, and it was a challenge beyond belief, but Kim Basinger decided to take up elephant rights.

Nancy I remember that.

Davies:

Barbara: Montel Williams did a whole show with her. She showed video of an elephant being
[00:35:00] trained in a manner that was not kind. All of America got to see this. Was it Entertainment Tonight? Access Hollywood. Access Hollywood excerpted it. I was furious. I called the executive producer and I said, "You owe me a piece." We worked for, I worked for a month. There's a woman named [Chavonne Shanda 00:35:20] who now is

- [00:35:30] working with Wendy Williams. She moved to New York from L.A. She was at Access Hollywood. I met her that year. She did the piece. We went to the Center for Elephant Conservation with Jack Hanna, they did a whole piece on everything good about what Ringling was doing with elephants, saving a species.
- [00:36:00] Things like that were the biggest challenge in teaching people the truth. I love animals so much, and the idea even that I would be anywhere near where someone did something harmful to an animal, would be, my head would explode. It was a challenge trying to teach people. There were people that would say things like, "Well, there is wild." Or, "There is a place that people can see elephants. It doesn't have to be in the circus." I said to this person who was from CNN, I said, "You have the opportunity to do things that most people don't. They'll never see an elephant. They're not going to be able to go on safari."
- [00:36:30] these are ambassadors for a species that needs to be taken care of or they'll disappear. That was a big challenge. I think that was the biggest challenge for me, was to teach people the truth about our trainers, the animals we lived with and worked with, and how much those animals were cared for and loved. They spent a lot of money with lies. That was a big challenge.
- [00:37:00] Nancy
Davies: One of the things, and correct me if I'm wrong, when the elephant conservation center was first established, it seemed to me that it was not something they really wanted to publicize. They didn't want people to know where it was. It was kind of quiet. But in later years that changed. Can you talk to me about that change? Was that something in the beginning you thought, "Let me talk about this more?"
- Barbara:
[00:37:30] No, we actually, I think, had planned to talk about it from the beginning, but it took us a while to build the facility. I would go every week down to Florida with Rodney Huey and Richard Freming and walk the premises and see what was going to be done. We always knew it was meant to save a species, to be able to breed.
- [00:38:00] Because most people don't really understand that male elephants, when they're in musth, it's not a sexual thing, it enrages them. Musth is something that makes a male elephant angry, distressed, aggressive. Because of that, you don't see male elephants performing very much or being on the road. During that phase, they are very aggressive. In a natural, or in their own settings, they would be fighting other elephants to be the bull that gets to inseminate the females. So, that's a period of time where being around a male elephant is very dangerous.
- [00:38:30]
- [00:39:00] So building that facility, it was built so that each of the males could have their own area, their own territory. They would not have to fight anyone and the females were brought to them, so that we could make babies and keep a species going. Anyone that understands conservation, would need to understand that you need a gene pool that's diverse. Otherwise, what happens is, it's inbreeding and the worst traits come out and often destroy the species. Genetic diversity is one of the most important things in any species in survival. Ringling had the largest herd outside of Southeast Asia. Having babies with these females was very important. It was an important worldwide

conservation issue.

[00:39:30] It meant the world to me, and it took a while for us to get to a place where we had everything in place, and pictures and video, and the ability to bring people in and know that they could see what we were doing there in a safe way. Elephants are elephants, so you want to be sure that anyone coming into the facility would be able to enjoy it or understand what we were doing. I had the pleasure of seeing an elephant being born, which, yeah. That's what I mean. It gave me experience in my life I never dreamed of. I would have begged to be able to do those things. And I didn't have to. It was a gift. It was a gift, all of this. So amazing. It changed my life in innumerable ways.

[00:40:00]

[00:40:30] Mr. Feld was incredibly kind. I had breast cancer at the age of 50. I thought I'd lose my job. The first thing he said to me was, "You're our family. Don't worry about the work." I came to work every day. Bald. I came from chemotherapy into the tent, or into the arena. They used to say when you're undergoing chemotherapy that your immune system is shot. You're not supposed to go on planes. I would walk into arenas. I never got sick. Never got sick. I had the easiest breast cancer of anybody in the world.

Nancy Well, that's the sawdust in the veins.

Davies:

Barbara: Yes. It's just the idea that that family, I walked into Winter Quarters bald, and everyone embraced me. Father Jerry, when I got sick, wrote to me and said, "You're in my daily mass." I had the easiest time of cancer of anyone in the world. I'm 15 years survival. Mr. Feld made it easy for me. I wasn't scared that I couldn't afford to take care of myself. To do what I had to do. It was, yeah, I will never be able to thank him enough for the things he did for me, personally. The gifts he gave me. He may have thought of it as my job. I thought of it as a gift. I really did.

[00:41:30]

[00:42:00] I had been a publicist before the circus, I know what it was. This world. The reason I took on national was, Susannah Smith said, "You've done one year, you did the New York dates and you did a great job. We're thinking about doing national publicity. We've never done it."

Nancy They hadn't?

Davies:

Barbara: No. They believed in, you know, we move from place to place, so what do you need national for. They had decided to sort of try. I think because I had done Letterman that year, I had started to do some national press, they thought, "Oh, well maybe." So, Susannah said to me, "Would you mind being the national publicist?" And I said, "Can I take an elephant to St. Patrick's Cathedral?" Her answer was, "When?" I went, "Yes, ma'am. I will take the job." That's what it was. It opened up an amazing world. To be able to do things no other publicist in the world could do.

[00:42:30]

Nancy Tell us about one of your favorite events.

Davies:

Barbara: My favorite event every year was the animal walk in New York. Being able to get off the train in Long Island City, line everyone up, all of the hooved animals, and walk with Gunther at the front of the herd, and take them through the Queens Midtown Tunnel.

[00:43:00]

[00:43:30] That I was used to traffic. And be able to walk through, come out on the New York side with hundreds, sometimes a thousand people roaring and screaming, and loving it. Walking to Madison Square Garden and bringing them up the ramp. It was my favorite, favorite event.

[00:44:00] New York was fun, especially in the beginning because I was young. We would do the animal walk at midnight. The next day we would do an afternoon show. That night we would do the opening night. We would do the opening night black tie party. And then Good Morning America from the arena, live at 4 AM. So, for a few years, I didn't sleep for two days. I just went from animal walk through Good Morning America and out.

Yeah. It was amazing and I loved the animal walk, because I loved the animals so much. Being able to walk in front of a herd of elephants. It was great. It was great.

Nancy What's one of your favorite stories that you ever got for the show?

Davies:

Barbara: Oh my.

Nancy You had a lot of them.

Davies:

[00:44:30]

Barbara: I really did. I'm trying to think what that would be.

Nancy Tell me about the time you got the Kevin Venardos, ringmaster, as one of the People Magazine's, I don't know-

Barbara: Hottest bachelors.

Nancy Yeah, there we go.

Davies:

Barbara: Well, you know what? That I can't take all the credit for that. Nicole Feld was working at People Magazine in the photo department.

Nancy It helps to know people.

Davies:

[00:45:00]

Barbara: Right. In the photo department. I asked her and we, together, spoke to them. I think it was as much her as me.

Nancy She worked there.

Davies:

Barbara: Right. They liked her. That was fun to do for Kevin. I loved him. He's a sweet, sweet man. I'm trying to think if there's ... I think probably that 48 Hours piece. Just because it was, from the beginning, it was literally putting a show together. Lowen Kelly was the producer. She now is working at CNN. She was amazing. She traveled with Tim. They hired acts, she filmed all of this stuff, rehearsals, through opening night at the Garden. I think that might be, it was Bill Ritter, was the correspondent. And Bill Ritter, actually, for Good Morning America did a trapeze.

[00:45:30]

Nancy Oh! They let him do that? Wow!

Davies:

[00:46:00]

Barbara: One of the only times I was ever able to. They put a mechanic on him, but they let him do it. I guess, maybe, probably the favorite one ever, was the year we did the cannon. Live cannon shot with John Weiss. We closed down 53rd Street for David Letterman, they closed down 53rd Street itself. We had to work with the city because we had to drill into the ground to put up a net. They didn't have the big foamy things they jump into, so we put up a net. Mike Melson, the general manager, worked with the City of New York to figure out where they could drill so they weren't going into water lines or electrical lines.

[00:46:30]

Nancy I can't believe they did that. Wow.

Davies:

Barbara: We put a lipstick camera in the cannon. It was extraordinary. All day long, media coming because we closed down the street. So all of New York media was focus on what are they doing? It was a great, great event. I loved it.

[00:47:00]

I think my last year was really fun. I had done it for 15 years and I had made some friends in media because of it, so, everyone said yes. We did CBS This Morning, we did the Today Show, we did Good Morning America. David Letterman didn't just do the ... Like very often, they would just send cameras and they would do these funny sort of, they would show video and what is this, but that year, they did the upside down act, and they announced, "From Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus!" It was one of the only times Dave ever said the whole name.

[00:47:30]

Nancy I was going to say, because he would not give company names.

Davies:

Barbara: That's right.

Nancy Wow.

Davies:

[00:48:00]

Barbara: And they did that year. Jerry Foley was the director. Jill Leiderman, who's now Jimmy Kimmel's executive producer, worked with Steve Smith as a child in Chicago. They did a show together, called Kidding Around. She was a little kid, Steve was a clown. And Jill worked with the writers at Letterman. So, every year, she and I would work. She would help me get circus done. And Jerry Foley, the director, was wonderful. So that last year, almost everyone in New York was kind. They knew it was my last being a publicist for them and so everyone did everything. It was huge. It was a huge year, in terms of publicity.

[00:48:30]

Nancy Let's talk about that final day or week. You know you're leaving and this is it. Was that really hard to get through? Or were you just making sure you took everything in and-

Davies:

Barbara: Yeah. I think it was. It wasn't hard because it was a decision I made. If I had been fired, it might have been harder. If they had said, "We need someone new." But because it was

[00:49:00]

[00:49:30] time for me, I was okay with that. I did take in everything. I really just ... The hardest part was because by that time I worked with marketing from the literal beginning right model meetings and sketches and things, so that we planned an integrated marketing campaign, where advertising, and publicity, and promotion, everything tied up.

[00:50:00] I used to get 400 emails a day. The day after I left, I had no emails. I said to my husband, I looked at him and I went, "It's like being dead. It's like I died. I've got no email!" It was a very weird experience. And it takes a while. If you've done this for that long, or lived on the train and been a performer, I think there's no one that can come out of this and just go into something new. It's very hard to sort of get through that beginning phase of weaning away from having that. I am the most spoiled publicist in America. Every client I have I love them, but god, they're boring. It's just not the same. I like what they do. I care about them. I'm glad to do the work, but it's just not the same.

Nancy It's not circus.

Davies:

Barbara: Right. The only thing I will say, is I did go out of doing corporate anything. The two [00:51:00] accounts that I work on now are military. The military is very much like the circus. It's a closed community. It takes a long time for you to be accepted as one of them. To be with military spouses and families and understand their life, because people don't get it. They don't.

[00:51:30] The military, right now, is a very misunderstood, because for all of those years, there was a draft. Everyone might have had someone in their family go into service. That hasn't been true for a very long time now. We have an all-volunteer service. During Vietnam, I didn't know any better, I was a teenager, and I didn't treat armed forces people very well. I thought they were doing something terrible. It's my karma to give [00:52:00] back to them now. To take care of military families that volunteer life and limb and come back with needs.

[00:52:30] So, I work for Semper Fi Fund, which is, according to Charity Watch and Charity Navigator, the number one veteran's charity in America. There are 40,000 veteran charities. Semper Fi Fund gives 94 cents of every dollar they get to people in need. Within 72 hours, they'll pay your mortgage, they'll pay your rent, they'll fly your family, they will take care of you, lifetime commitment.

[00:53:00] Semper Fi. Semper Fidelis means always faithful. They're the one charity that's a veteran's charity that, if you are critically ill, will take care of you for the rest of your life. Most charities come in, they do what they can do, and then they have to leave and they do it for someone else. Our service members know we're there for their entire life. If you lose your leg, we will not only help you get your prosthetic, but if in two years you're feeling well enough and you want to go fishing, we'll find an adaptive vehicle and get that for you, so that you can reintegrate into your life and have a full life. They're a wonderful, wonderful group.

[00:53:30] The military is very much like circus. They move around a lot. They have very stressful lives. Very unique kind of a life, and I'm drawn to that, apparently. It happened at like a weird way, the same way that circus happened in a weird way. But I love it. That's all I've

done for the last seven years. I work with Semper Fi Fund and a company called Armed Forces Insurance, which is 130 years old.

Nancy So, you like old companies, too.

Davies:

Barbara: Yes. Icons. General MacArthur's grandfather started Armed Forces Insurance.

[00:54:00]

Nancy Well, and Ringling and the military have such a long history, too, so it's good to know

Davies: that you transitioned into something.

Barbara: Yes. I love that idea that Ringling taught the military how to move by train.

Nancy And now you're taking all that to them.

Davies:

Barbara: Yes. I really do, I love them. They're wonderful people that the same as circus, they devote their lives to others. Circus folks do what they do to make you happy. To make you smile, laugh, clap, applaud, whatever. Volunteer military are there to protect and serve us. They're there for us. I want to be there for them.

[00:54:30]

Nancy Along those lines, I want to talk about the people behind the scenes. Everyone sees the people in costume, but the crew, everyone is what puts on that show, as well.

Davies: [00:55:00]

Barbara: Absolutely.

Nancy How would you sum them up, the people that you worked with?

Davies:

Barbara: The hardest working crew in the world. They really are. And one of the things that I think I was most proud of in my life, was I knew all the crew members. One day I was in the arena with Mr. Feld and he said something, "Do you know Barbara?" And that person said, "Not only do we know her, but she treats everyone of us as if we were the star of the show." That was one of my proudest moments. It really was, because I did. I fed, I made sure that they were taken care of. They helped me do live things. Mark Gaipo, Mike Melson, general managers, people that were doing all, you know, I could pitch a story, but I couldn't get them there. I could not do what those people did for me to make those stories alive. To make that television look great. That was everyone in the crew and I loved them. They were great, and they taught me so much.

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[00:56:00]

[00:56:30] I remember one year we were at Nassau Coliseum, we were moving into Nassau and there was a snowstorm and we were late. We didn't cancel the show and we should've. There were people in the audience and the show wasn't together. We were helping pull ring rubber in front of an audience. Ruth Chaddick got into makeup and went into the audience, yes, to keep people busy until we set up the show.

[00:57:00] So, yeah, the people behind the scenes are extraordinary human beings. They do so much and, you're right, they're all in black and no one knows to applaud them, but I did. I did. I loved them.

Nancy
Davies: To wrap up, I wondered if you had been the national publicist when the news came out that the show was ending. What would be your message to media that you personally, I think, about what the show has meant?

[00:57:30]

Barbara: It's Americana. It's America. The show was really what America is, you know. The dedication, the talent, the desire to bring joy into people's lives, that's, to me, that's what America should be. I do, I'm positive, that my last messages would be about the fact that we may be in a situation where people are locked into their earbuds and their phones and their screens, but that won't be for very long, because human beings are social animals. We need to experience things together, to sit next to someone else clapping and all of that. It's a primal need. It's a primal social need. It's why theater exists. It's why we're going back to the Moth and to storytelling. I really believe people are getting overwhelmed with the other.

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[00:58:30]

I don't know what I would have said, because it would have just broken my heart to have had to be the one to tell the world we're not going to be here next year. It's hard for me to think of now. To think children won't know what The Greatest Show On Earth was unless they look at it in a video. It's hard to imagine. And I think my message would have been this is just heartbreaking. Because America does want it. It's just they got distracted and didn't realize that if they didn't show up, it would go away. If that was the message, if you don't show up we're not going to be here next year, I think we would have been there.

[00:59:00]

Nancy
Davies: I thank you so much, Barbara-
Barbara: Oh, thank you.

Nancy
Davies: For all your thoughts and wonderful work over the years.

Barbara: It was the greatest pleasure of my life, so thank you for asking me to talk about it.

Nancy
Davies: Everyone loves you and your legacy lives on in online media that is still there.

Barbara: Thank you so much.