

The Greatest Show on Earth

Kristin Gembara: Circus Girl

By Lynn Coffey



Kris Gembara today

Although Kristin Gembara grew up in a Chicago neighborhood, her maternal roots were planted firmly in the red dirt of Nelson County where she ultimately came to live. At five years of age, Kris had her first taste of the circus when the renown Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus came to Chicago, bringing all the excitement of exotic animals, death-defying arial acts, and a wealth of clowns under one roof. At that young age, Kris not only attended the circus but fell in love with it and sixteen years later, at 21, Kris joined The Greatest Show on Earth and began living the most exciting year of her life.

At that time, Mayor Richard J. Daley was the mayor of Chicago and when the circus performed at the Amphitheater each November, he would send out free tickets to every household in the 11th Ward for Democratic Night.

At five years of age, Kris remembers being dazzled by all the acts the circus offered and as an older teenager she and friends would go and talk to the concession workers who were members of the circus family but weren't part of any particular act.

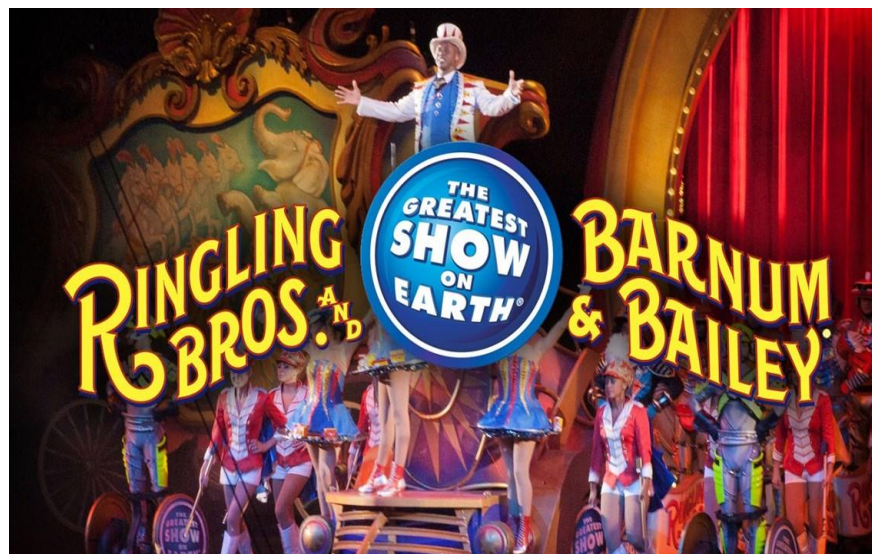
When the circus train came into town it parked as close to the International Amphitheater where it was playing and then paraded the animals and performers from the train into the amphitheater to set up, giving the public a taste of what was to come.

Kris studied dance from an early age and later became a student teacher at the same studio she had attended from age five until she married. She went to Richard J. Daley College for two years, getting an associate degree in liberal arts. At the same time, she was studying ballet at the Ruth Page School of Dance.

After a brief move to Virginia, Kris returned to the Chicago area in 1988, got a job at a renown Chicago East Bank Club and began living on her own, while continuing to study dance. One day she was looking at an arts publication called The Reader to let people know what's happening in the area, along with an assortment of want ads, and what businesses were hiring. Kris said, "I noticed the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus was in town auditioning for dancers. At that point, being a dancer, I auditioned for everything that came in. They called it the "Cattle

Call,” because so many people showed up to audition for one or two spots. I told my dad the circus was holding auditions and I was going to take the bus to the stadium to try out. The venue wasn’t in a very good neighborhood so my dad offered to drive me. Once there they had different groups of us doing basic choreography steps but unfortunately, I didn’t make the final cut and they thanked me for coming. I was disappointed but my dad made me feel better by saying, ‘That’s ok, you were the best one out there.’ Two weeks later, Ringling called and said they were starting a new show and wanted to know if I would be interested in signing a contract to perform for a year? The rest, as they say, is history.”

When asked how her parents reacted to their daughter’s plan to join the circus Kris laughed and said, “my dad was okay with it, my mom not quite sure, and my grandma and great-grandma said, *Whaaaat?*” She got her great-grandmother’s blessing when Kris agreed to visit all the relatives across the United States whenever she performed in a city where they lived. Kris had just started to date her future husband, Brian Gembara, right before she auditioned for Ringling and many times he drove or flew to where the circus was performing to spend time with her.



Advertising posters for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus

In November 1988, Kris boarded a plane bound for Venice, Florida, the winter quarters of the Ringling Circus and began a six-weeks training period to basically learn the show before it opened in January of 1989. Kris said, “They determined what each person could do and told me I would be dancing, riding the elephants and performing the Spanish Web which turned out to be hanging from a rope suspended from the ceiling while doing a choreographed routine.”



Elephant Girl: Kris riding on top of Mary, front row center

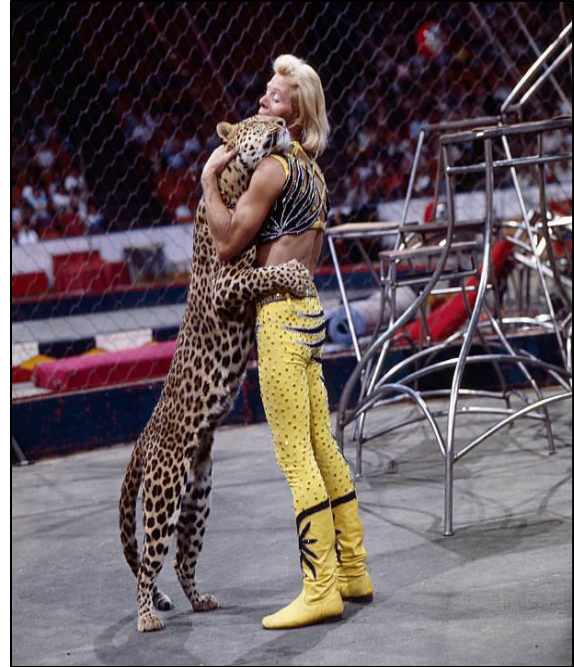


Kris practicing on the Spanish Web

Kris was fortunate enough to be part of Ringling Brothers when the famed German animal trainer, Gunther Gebel-Williams was the #1 act in circus history. He was part of the Ringling Brothers Circus from 1968 to 1990; the year of his farewell tour. He was responsible for showing Kris the correct way to mount and ride the elephants during her time in the circus. Although Williams was the star of the show, it was Irving Feld and his son Kenneth who actually owned the circus.

After performing in Venice, the circus traveled by train up the east coast before heading cross country to many of the western states. The train, a conveyance for the circus troupes, at one time had upwards to a hundred cars carrying the performers, staff, animals, train crew, and equipment to each location. Kris had a small compartment on the train that housed several chests for storage, a collapsible table that doubled as a

bed and overhead cabinets for her costumes and personal goods. Clowns had their own cars, men and women were housed in separate quarters, and some of the main acts had a half or entire car to themselves. There was a “pie car,” a small restaurant where you could buy snacks or dinner. Most of the train you could walk through to get to another car or the outside vestibule, the area between the cars. Kris relates, “I was standing on the vestibule when I saw the desert for the first time and could not believe my eyes. We were pulling in to Tucson, Arizona, just as the sun was going down over the desert and it was the most moving feeling I’ve ever had. The train had a rocking motion that I loved and at night it made it easier to fall asleep. One thing we did was have big parties in the train yard with bonfires and the different families would cook their specialties. While we were stopped in Greenville, North Carolina, they were having a big barbeque that night and I told them it was my 22nd birthday and they said it was in my honor, which was nice.



Gunther Gabel-Williams with a leopard



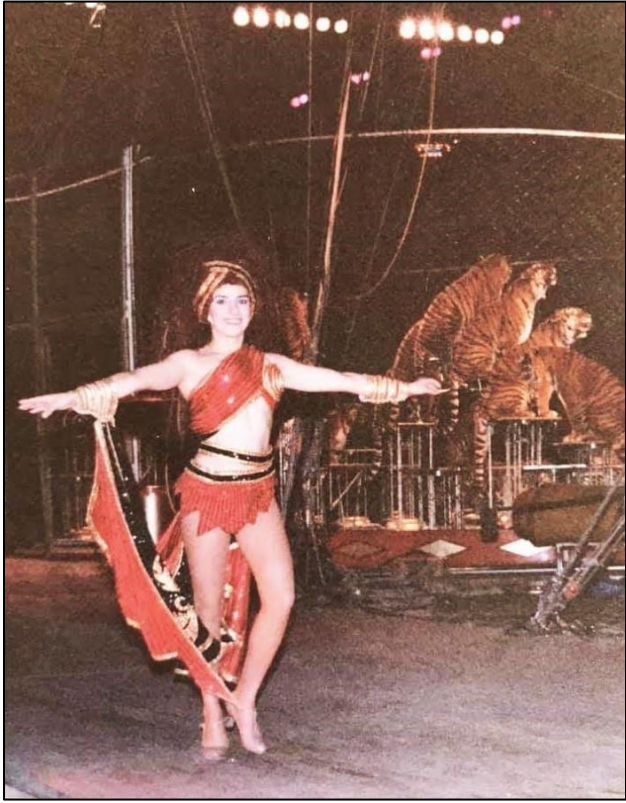
Kris celebrating her 22nd birthday with show mates

days off. On Saturdays, between the second and third show, the Catholic church would send a priest over for a non-denominational worship service anyone could attend.

By the time Kris was part of Ringling Brothers the Chicago Amphitheater had been closed. She performed at the Chicago Stadium which was replaced by the United Center. In the arenas around the country, the circus had to share the space with professional athletes such as hockey and basketball players who were scheduled to play there also.

The circus, which was made up of a red and blue unit, had a yearly circuit around the country. The first year of the tour was major cities and the second year was called the Rodeo Route which consisted of smaller towns. The circus usually stayed in a particular city for one week. In Chicago it was two weeks and when they played in New York City’s Madison Square Garden, they stayed for six weeks. The circus put on a show once every evening, two or three times on the weekends and everyone had Mon-

Scenes of the Circus



Slave girl outfit in front of the trained tigers



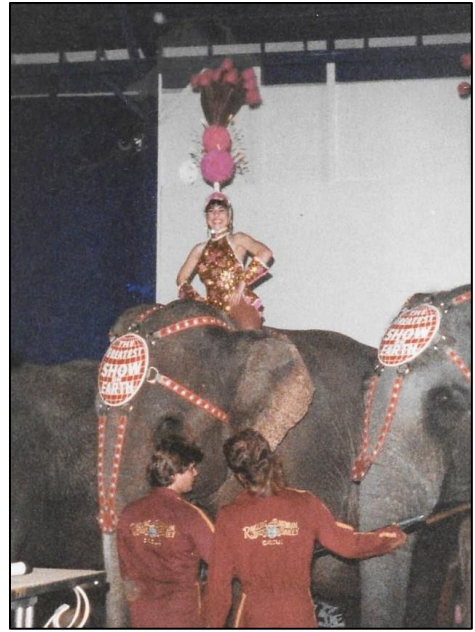
Kris, on left, in one of her showgirl outfits



Kris shown on far left, during one of the dance routines



Dressed as a Southern Belle



Kris atop Osan the elephant



The Ringling Bros. Circus train



Unloading the elephants from the train

Kris said, “Most of the clowns and showgirls were American but many people in the different acts were from around the world and I made some good friends, some of which I am still in contact with.”

Although Ringling Brothers offered a new contract for the 1990 season, Kris decided to come back to Chicago and she and Brian were married in 1991. Eventually the couple had two children but Kris continued to teach dance for another twenty years and later went back to school and got a certificate in horticulture. She worked four years in a sustainable landscape business and went on to start her own personal gardening business by the name of Garden Gems.

There were a lot of twists and turns in the years that followed, including moving to Nelson County, Virginia, but Kris never forgot the exciting year she was part of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. “I loved every part of it and it truly is, The Greatest Show on Earth.”