

Janice Aria was the second presenter on the second day of the NAIA Conference. She began her presentation knowing she had very interesting and “tough” acts to follow. She had no need to worry - this dynamic woman had us spellbound; she is a consummate entertainer.

Originally from Oakhurst, NJ, Jan began her career with Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey in 1972 when she left her last semester at New York University and applied to Ringling Bros. Clown College. Upon graduation, she got a contract with prestigious Ringling Bros. and that was the beginning of a love affair. She told us that it fulfilled a dream -- to ride up on top of those wonderful elephants. She was especially featured with the elephants and bear acts, but she also had trained dog acts with Golden Retrievers of her breeding.

She is, of course, a consummate entertainer who toured worldwide. Aria has close to 40 years in animal training and animal behavior, and in 2005, she was named Director of Animal Stewardship. She directs the elephant-training program for Ringling, teaches training methods to animal handlers, and is involved in the care of the largest herd of Asian elephants in the Western Hemisphere.

All of the animals in the circus are “free contact” as opposed to “barrier contact,” which is generally used for animals in other settings. She stressed that the key to having happy animals is finding what they want to do, and training from there. When the Circus arrives by train at each new town, they have The Animal Walk, which is a parade from the train station to the performance venue. In Los Angeles, that Animal Walk parade had to take place at 3:00 AM to avoid confrontation with the uneducated, screaming PETA detractors. That change of plans unfortunately robbed Los Angelinos from seeing the time-honored tradition experienced by generations of children who NEED to share in the experience of seeing the circus come to town. It also robbed many of us older animal/circus lovers who might be able to help make the circus’ entrance to Los Angeles a welcoming enough event to make a daytime parade possible next time they come to LA. WE ALL NEED TO HONOR THE WONDERFUL TRADITION OF THE CIRCUS!

Feld Entertainment, the parent company of Ringling, maintains a 200-acre Center for Elephant Conservation in Florida. They have 52 elephants there but only 18 are used for performing. The others are senior citizens and elephants who are no longer performing, but they are all maintained there for life. Aria works at the farm helping to train and educate for the future of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey.

She mentioned several incidental things repeated by others. We live with our animals 24/7 and we love them. Today we use technical scientific terms in training our animals, but we have always instinctually known and understood the training behaviors that were needed. Long years of experience watching and living with these animals and providing the highest level of care for them has given us an understanding of what works and how to keep them happy. It is the training and work that keeps them stimulated and engaged.

Those of you who receive the CaRPOC newsletter during the year have already read about the lawsuit filed against Feld Entertainment by a former employee and different AR groups over mistreatment of animals. It took nine years to defeat the suit and was a huge win for Feld. It isn’t really finished because in 2007 Feld countersued the activists, and PETA has filed with the USDA against Feld for animal mistreatment. CaRPOC will provide updates as they become available.