

# CIRCUS SISTERS

When this big top comes to town, it brings more than clowns, tigers and acrobats!

By MARTINA HART

**T**HEY ARE PART OF THE EXTENDED circus family, sharing the life on the road and the journey of their lives, where cultural and religious differences and the challenges of constantly picking up and moving on fade away.

Sr. Dorothy Fabritze and Sr. Bernard Overkamp travel and work with Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, where Sr. Bernard is a seamstress in the ladies' wardrobe and Sr. Dorothy is one of the schoolteachers. Both are Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart based in Reading, Pennsylvania.

"We have 19 schoolchildren, and I'm responsible for nine of these, grades one, two, and three," Sr. Dorothy explains. Classes are taught from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on show days, which are Wednesday through

Sunday. Monday is a travel day to the next venue; Tuesday is a setup day.

In addition to academics, Sr. Dorothy is also available for religious education and prepares children for the sacraments. Occasionally adults approach her for marriage preparation or for instruction in the Catholic faith. She has led interdenominational Bible studies and taught English.

Sr. Bernard's job is to maintain and handle the women's costumes before, during and after the shows. She and a colleague begin two hours before showtime and are responsible for about 30 performers. They make sure everyone is dressed correctly before they go out on the floor, fixing dresses and shoes if necessary.

"And then my ministry is to be with the young girls," Sr. Bernard adds, "listen to them, listen to

their stories, listen to their heartaches." She has the reputation of being a grandmother figure one can go to in time of need.

The 300 members of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus come from 18 different countries. For some of the younger artists it is their first time away from home. Others have grown up in the extended circus family and are prepared to follow in their parents' footsteps and continue the tradition.

The pair has crossed the U.S. several times in their pickup truck, towing the 29-foot trailer they call home. The same show runs for two years; then performers either change their act or join another circus, and new performers come on board. "People like us, teachers or the prop crew or the wardrobe crew, can stay as long as they want," says Sr. Dorothy.

Over the years the sisters have built many a relationship. New performers soon find out "to go to Sister" for matters of faith or other personal issues. In her contacts with the artists, Sr. Bernard



always stresses the idea of circus as family. The circus has traditionally considered itself as a family and as a family-oriented entertainment.

"I see her forming this oneness in how she deals with the young women," says Sr. Dorothy, "how she deals with their relationship issues at that time in their lives, how she encourages them and directs, guides ... She tells them, 'Let's stay together, let's work together, let's be a family, let's respect one another.'

"Faith is alive and well, whatever faith tradition it is," Sr. Dorothy adds, pointing out that religion has always played an important role among circus people. "And when you have a job that is more dangerous than some, you rely on your faith."

"They do make the sign of the cross before they enter the floor," Sr. Bernard observes. The sisters usually ask a priest to say Mass for the circus company in the arenas on Saturday afternoons, inviting anyone who wants to come.

After the last performance in a place,

the sisters make sure everything is packed safely for traveling and help with loading and unloading wagons that are pulled to the train yard and loaded onto a flatbed train car.

"There are 36 coaches, 16 flatbeds, 4 stock cars and 2 concession containers," Sr. Dorothy explains. "It's a mile long when it's running."

Before their circus ministry, both sisters had worked together in Papua New Guinea. After returning to the U.S., it was Sr. Dorothy who first heard about it in 1996 at a convention of the United States Catholic Mission Association. Realizing the need for more full-time ministers — and keeping in mind the charism of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart to reach out to those who have not heard the message of God's love or are lax in their response — she decided to give it a try. She asked Sr. Bernard to join her, and although both hesitated at first, they soon fell in love with their new mission.

They started out working with smaller circuses. Sr. Bernard cooked meals for the cast and crew and sold ride tickets. Sr. Dorothy helped with tent raising, taking entrance tickets and drawing the curtain during performances. In 2000 they were invited to join Ringling Brothers.

"When we were thinking about starting this, I was in fundraising," Sr. Dorothy recalls. "So I specifically talked about circus ministry, what I knew about it at that time. It got the people excited, and they donated all the money for the truck and trailer."

One of the trailer's bedrooms has been converted into a chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved with special permission from the Vatican.

Internationally, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of the Migrants and Itinerant People provides resources for ministry to traveling entertainers. In the U.S., where the Catholic Church has been present in circuses since the 1920s, Fr. Jerry Hogan, a parish priest in Massachusetts, is national circus chaplain. "He comes to us multiple times during the year," Sr. Dorothy explains, describing how Fr. Hogan administers the sacraments to the circus family members who have been prepared by her.

"This is my goal," Sr. Dorothy concludes, "to be a living, breathing presence of God in this society called circus."

"The message that God does love, God does forgive, God is continually there for us, is a very unifying, making-us-one concept." ■



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The children of the circus love Sr. Dorothy because "she loves God."

