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### The Cruellest Show on Earth

As a child growing up in America many can expect that they will attend a circus event before they reach the age of adulthood. All of the stimulation under the big top is very exciting as a youngster and parents make a point to ensure their child has the pleasure to experience the circus at least once. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey is inarguably the most popular circus in America. Barnum is actually quoted as saying “Elephants and clowns are pegs on which to hang a circus”(Encyclopaedia Britannica). I vividly remember attending one of their circuses with my elementary school when I was young. At the circus you can taste the popcorn in the air. A variety of cheerful sounds make their way through your ears and down into your stomach creating a feeling of anxious joy. I remember the tremendous laughter and fascinated looks on the audience member’s faces as they watched clowns bouncing around in goofy clothing and makeup, tightrope walkers making their way across what appears to be thin air, and trapeze artists swinging across the stage from one bar to the next. It all seems so magical. Yet the most memorable part of the circus act is without a doubt the incredibly cute performing elephants, with their red and gold circus dressing and their gigantic props fit only for beings of their enormous size. These gigantic creatures move so fluidly from one trick to the next. One would think they were born for the circus spotlight. Ringling Bros. leads their audience members and the general public to believe that these elephants are happy, well taken care of, and are living

their lives exactly as an elephant should. The truth is that circus elephants are mistreated and deserve to be living free amongst other elephants in the wild.

Ringling Bros. advertises that their circus travels to over 90 cities across North America every year (Feldentertainment.com). Can fame and such frequent travel make the largest land mammal on earth happy? In their natural habitats, elephants are incredibly social animals and live amongst herds of other elephants. Male elephants, also called bulls, will only remain with the herd in which they were born into until they reach sexual maturity. Males may be anywhere between ten and fifteen years of age before they leave and join a smaller bachelor herd where their temperament changes and they become far less social. On the contrary, female elephants stick with the herd in which they were born into for their entire lives (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Females typically have predictable temperaments making them easier to train than their male counterparts. It is because of the female tendency toward more stable social structures that they are found to be better suited for the circus and thus are in higher demand. However there are two significant issues surrounding the employment of female elephants in the circus versus males. The first is that females have the potential to give birth to a baby elephant during their time with the circus. When this occurs the circus will always separate the baby from the mother, which naturally causes the mother elephant a great deal of stress. It is very sad, but the viewpoint of the circus is that the show must go on. The second issue is that greater social bonds are broken when the circus removes a female from a herd versus removing a male. Observing female elephants in the wild you will notice that they exhibit almost human-like behavior and emotions. Life in the circus means that some of these elephants are spending hours and even entire days locked up in modified train cars moving from one performance to the next. Circus elephants are surrounded by everything but the trees and waterholes that you see them lingering around on the National

Geographic Channel. Most importantly, these poor elephants are isolated away from the herds that were once part of their innate comfort zone. The circus rips elephant families apart.

In the eyes of the Ringling Bros. as a company only looking to profit, an elephant's sole purpose is to obey trainers and make the audience happy. Elephants are indeed animals but instead are treated like disposable property within the circus. Ringling Bros. claims that their elephants are "provided with around-the-clock veterinary attention, nutritious meals, and a clean, safe home" ([ringlingelephantcenter.com](http://ringlingelephantcenter.com)). Yet past reports show us that there is a significant amount of neglect and lack of consideration for the health and safety of these gentle giants. A recent Washington Post article reflects on the death of a Ringling Bros. baby elephant named Kenny when during a 1998 trip to Jacksonville he was forced to perform even after his handlers found that he was very sick and badly needed veterinary care. He was in such bad shape that he was only able to complete two of his three scheduled performances one night. Kenny was discovered dead in his stall the following morning (Washington Post). Just one year after Kenny's death, the USDA investigated the death of yet another elephant that died in the hands of Ringling Bros. circus. This was a rather unusual story where a four-year-old elephant drowned after refusing to get out of a pond during a routine stop between shows (Washington Post). A video of the pond scene can even be found on the Internet and has elevated controversy against Ringling Bros. ever since the incident occurred. Aside from the poor treatment afforded by their caretakers, circus elephants face a number of other challenges in being locked up in captivity. Being on the road so often they are continually exposed to diseases and bacteria, which they ultimately pass on to one another. In addition, Ringling Bros. would never confess that their elephants are chained up for incredibly long periods of time in between shows. No animal deserves to be treated this way.

Who would have thought that you could teach an elephant to sit like a dog? In reality you cannot teach an elephant to sit, you can only scare it into sitting for you. On the Center for Elephant Conservation website, Ringling Bros. states, “A positive, healthy environment is the foundation of training elephants. Therefore, the cornerstone of all circus elephant training at Ringling Bros. is reinforcement through praise, repetition and reward.” An interesting choice of words is used in this statement. Praise may be granted to some of these elephants for their fantastic tricks and good behavior. But the only repetition is in the bull hook that circus trainers use. A bull hook is a training tool similar to the metal rod that we humans use to poke wood in a fireplace. Elephants may have tough, thick skin but being hit and prodded by a bull hook still hurts them and it doesn’t take much force to cause serious injury. A Los Angeles Times report from 2001 talks about a Ringling Bros. trainer who hit an elephant with a bull hook so hard during a show that he left her wounded and bloody for the audience to witness. Some elephant trainers even use an electric rod for greater training effectiveness. Using these tools, which inarguably can be considered weapons, an elephant can be trained to sit, stand on its hind legs, piggyback on other elephants and even bow to the ground. This type of behavior would never be seen observing elephants in the wild. It is important to note that this type of training puts a great deal of stress on the elephant’s body, as they are not physically designed to perform these bodily movements as regularly as the circus requires of them. Elephants do not have the same anatomy as a dog and cannot perform like a dog without repercussions. In their natural habitats, elephants only lie down for three to four hours at night to sleep. Due to the structure of their body it is difficult for an elephant to get back up onto their feet and takes a considerable amount of effort to do so. It is no wonder that these elephants become “washed up” and physically broken after years of such brutal circus training.

In March of 2015, Feld Entertainment, the parent company for Ringling Bros. Barnum and Barley, announced that by the year 2018 they will have completed phasing elephants out of their circus performances. While it is beautiful to see that Feld Entertainment has crumbled under the pressure of critics, animal activist groups, and the media, justice for these circus elephants is needed now. Under our current legal system, elephants are considered property despite the fact that they are sentient beings that feel and love just as we humans do. Let us teach the children of future generations this same love so that they may witness a more compassionate world where entertainment no longer involves the exploitation of animals.

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