

ANIMAL FACTS & FIGURES

Respect Is Key When Working With Animals

by Mark Oliver Gebel

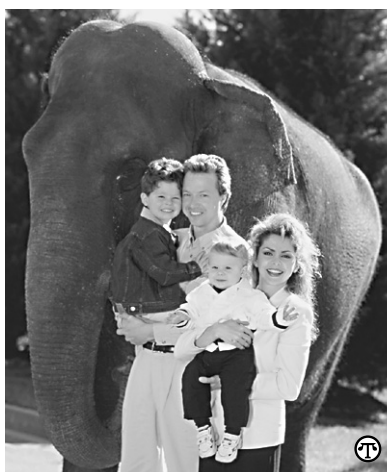
(NAPSA)—The circus has been my life since the day I was born, and for more than 30 years, I've been privileged and honored to work with animals in The Greatest Show On Earth®.

When my son was born, I thought to myself that everything had changed, that my responsibilities had broadened to include fatherhood. I was going to be responsible for raising a child—nurturing his growth and instilling in him our family's values. But, I realized that the experiences I'd had working with and caring for animals over the years with Ringling Bros. had prepared me to accept this new responsibility. In fact, my father, Gunther Gebel-Williams, once told me that training animals teaches you a lot about raising children. He said, "Never forget: both require your undivided patience and love."

People love to warn parents-to-be about the dramatic change in lifestyle that happens once a child enters their family—constant feedings, all-nighters with sick children, always putting someone's needs before yours, and no time for yourself. Similarly, there are no days off for anyone who works with animals. Everything we do concerns them; I've spent countless hours tending to the animals I share my life with—feeding them, cleaning their living areas and ensuring their well-being.

Most people see the circus as a unique, fun, even glamorous, lifestyle—where else in the world do clowns live alongside acrobats, aerialists and alpacas? What most people don't realize is that for those of us who care for the animals, it's also a lifestyle of responsibility. The elephants, horses, zebras, camels and tigers we live with receive our love and respect, and they benefit from the expert care that comes from our experience and responsibility to them.

My father also said that the honor and respect you show animals comes back to you tenfold, and he was right. I've grown up with many of the animals with Ringling Bros., and we have a closer bond than anyone could imagine or I can even describe.



At Ringling Brothers, animals are treated just like members of the family. Pictured are trainer Mark Oliver Gebel with his wife Cristina, children Hunter and Adam, and Asia, a pachyderm pal.

The basic foundation of these relationships is respect.

To work with animals, you need to build respect. It starts simply with affection and constant contact. Every time I'm with them, whether it's feeding time, training, or rehearsal, the animals get my full attention and concentration. This consistency creates the respectful relationship evident in the animals' reactions to me in the ring. The elephants will flap their ears, reach out with their trunks and make chirping noises to greet me. The tigers will rub up against their cages purring, eager for a pat. You can't force this kind of respect—it has to be earned.

It's no secret that we cherish the animals with Ringling Bros. Anyone who comes to the show can see that. We are deeply committed to providing a healthy and safe environment for our animal performers to ensure their well-being. I am grateful to my father for fostering in me that sense of responsibility and to Ringling Bros. for being the kind of place where we all could thrive. He is one of those who set the bar high to begin with and, as his son, I am proud to carry on his legacy.

Mark Oliver Gebel is the son of Gunther Gebel-Williams, the greatest wild animal trainer of all time.