

# Activist Corner

## One Girl Versus the Big Top

By Julia Janak, Director of Grassroots Advocacy

**'Everyone compromises,' says Ringling Bros. But for those of us concerned with animal welfare, what kind of compromise is acceptable?**

Elephants are extremely intelligent and social animals; when denied contact with family members, they suffer from stress and loneliness. Circus elephants live alone, taken from their mothers when they are just one year old. Training methods can involve electric prods, clubs, hooks and whips. Combined with the lack of roaming space, the potential for abuse and loneliness can cause elephants to become unmanageable and dangerous, occasionally attacking their trainers or even harming innocent bystanders.

12-year-old Heather Herman of Arvada, Colorado, decided she wanted to prevent circuses from using elephants and other exotic animals. She contacted the Rocky Mountain Animal Defense (RMAD), an animal protection group in Boulder, Colorado, to suggest that Denver initiate a city-wide ordinance to ban circuses with elephants and any other exotic animals.

"I was skeptical at first," says Dave Crawford, the Executive Director of RMAD. "Ballot initiatives take a lot of money and a lot of time; knowing the resources behind Ringling Bros., we felt it would be a Herculean task." The task was great: 5,000 signatures to qualify for the ballot, and that still did not guarantee success at the polls. But Herman's enthusiasm and persistence won them over. "She totally motivated and inspired me to get involved," said RMAD volunteer Doyle Forrester, who helped draft the ordinance language.

Now 15 years old, Herman is the founder and president of Youth Opposed to Animal Acts (YOTAA), a non-profit group dedicated to passing the Denver city initiative, which will be on the primary election ballot August 10. Should

the initiative fail, Herman promised she is ready to fight again next year. She credits her parents for helping her develop a love for animals. "My parents taught me to respect people and animals," she says proudly.

A representative for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus told DDAL that circuses with captive breeding programs, like Ringling's, actually contribute to the welfare of elephants. "Everyone compromises because it's about survival," said spokesperson Barbara Pflughaupt.

But for those of us concerned with animal welfare, what kind of compromise is acceptable? Can a life spent in a cage too small to turn around in possibly contribute to the species' healthy and humane survival?

This summer the Detroit Zoo, a leader in animal care and welfare, became the first zoo to voluntarily release elephants to a sanctuary because the animals' psychological needs could not be met by life at the zoo. When asked why the elephants were released, zoo director Ron Kagan said, "Now



**15-year-old Heather Herman helped introduce a ballot initiative to ban circuses with exotic animals in Denver, CO.**

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we understand how much more is needed to be able to meet all the physical and psychological needs of elephants in captivity.”

Assuming a zoo can better accommodate elephants than a circus, simply by providing a stable and more naturalistic environment free of behavior demands, what are the implications for circuses when one of the nation's leading zoos admits it cannot adequately care for elephants? If a life at the zoo causes unacceptable physical and psychological stress, can life in a traveling circus possibly be better?

Herman and her team of volunteers in Colorado are optimistic for the Denver initiative. She tells us, “Hopefully there will be copycat cities, not only in Colorado, but around the U.S.” Check the DDAL Web site, or visit [www.voteeyes100.org](http://www.voteeyes100.org) for poll results after August 10.

*Editor's Note: On August 8, The Washington Post reported that allegations over the death of a lion at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus have resulted in an investigation by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.*

## Activist Recognition Program 2003 – 2004

DDAL thanks the following outstanding activists who have put pen to paper to speak out for animals. If you'd like to be a voice for the voiceless and are wondering how you can help, here are some suggestions. Write letters to Congress about pending legislation affecting animals. Submit editorials about relevant animal issues to your local newspapers. Write letters of thanks or protest as suggested in *Yips & Yowls*, available in *Animal Guardian* and on our Web site. For more information about sending action letters, please contact DDAL or visit our Web site at [www.ddal.org](http://www.ddal.org). And please remember to send us copies of your letters, and especially any responses you receive.

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