

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — FALL 2014**



**Interviewee:** Tito Gaona

**Interviewer:** Melissa Solis

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*Tito Gaona was a trapeze artist born in Guadalajara, Mexico. He spent his childhood summers in Sarasota with his father. Tito, his two brothers, and his sister formed the well-known trapeze act, the Flying Gaonas. They performed for various circuses, including the Ringling Brothers Circus. After traveling the world, Tito settled down in Venice where he is now the owner and founder of the Flying Trapeze Academy.*

**Solis:** Do you want to start by stating your name?

**Gaona:** My name is Tito Gaona. I was a flying trapeze artist for many, many years with the Ringling Brothers. And now I love being home, but I still travel with Ringling.

**Solis:** What's it like traveling with Ringling?

**Gaona:** Well it is great because now I'm consulting and I manage the flying trapeze act. And it's great because you still continue on what you did for most of your life. So it is nice, part of that.

**Solis:** What was your role, specifically, with the Ringling Brothers?

**Gaona:** Well when I was performing we were the Flying Gaonas. It was the brothers, all of the brothers and sister. So we formed an act and we did marvelous things. We had a great time. It was just beautiful because you have your brothers and your sister travelling from city to city and, you know, crowd pleasers and having fun with the audience. It was fantastic. It was great. And, you know, of course Sarasota and Venice and this area. It was the circus city capital of the world. It was what Ringling brought here. John Ringling actually started his museum, as you know already, the home and he loved the weather around here, you know, no pollution. It was great. So it was a beautiful, beautiful bay looking into the St. Armand's circle. And he had a vision and he really started Florida, I mean Sarasota. So then he built his winter home for the Ringling Brothers. And all the performers came from everywhere to

the Sunshine State where they could practice and stay away from the snow, the cold weather. The beautiful days like this, it was fantastic for the winter. So they were really the snow birds. And then [Phone rings in the background] it became tradition. The circus and everything was just what it was. It's a tradition and the phone is ringing, I'm sorry.

**Solis:** It's okay, do you want to go get it?

**Gaona:** It's okay. So, you know, traditional. That's the circus. It is what it is and nobody can change that. And now—the Venice arena used to be here. They changed it over and brought it to Venice. But after being neglected for ten years or more you know, they just let it run down. And we the foundation, the Venice Circus Arts Foundation, it's a non-profit organization we wanted to save it. But when you don't have your heart in it, like preserving circus history or whatever it is, they just want to take it down and tear it down and have another lot, another McDonalds, [Chuckles] another place. But anyway, I think they're making a big mistake not saving it.

**Solis:** How many brothers and sisters did you have?

**Gaona:** We are seven of us. But only five of us, you know, we performed together. The four of us right now. Yeah, the four of us performed. And it was a blast. It was great because we grew up, we went to school, came on vacations from Mexico. Came here and grew up. And my father, being a part of the circus, we wanted to be a part of the circus. And that's how we got involved. We started to—well the circus it was called the climbing baby cobra, the circus. And that circus was a big circus under the big top. You know, after Ringling. So we started in that one and then we started developing these original acts and they were a hit. And so we stayed with Ringling for 17 years and here we are. It was fun.

**Solis:** What inspired you all to join the circus? What do you love most about it?

**Gaona:** Well the most inspiring was that my grandfather had a circus back in Mexico. So you know. Grandpa, wow. We always looked at things and we always heard things about him and all my father's brothers and sisters. That was a big family, The Gaona Brother Circus. And they, I can just remember with photos growing up. I mean I don't remember the circus really, but it was a big tradition back in the twenties, thirties, and forties. So at the time, my father they were little kids with their own circus. And then all of a sudden that was our generation. We were the 6<sup>th</sup> generation, right now. Victoria she kept going with the tradition and she still loves the circus, so we'll see.

**Solis:** Victoria is your daughter?

**Gaona:** Daughter, yeah. Yeah, she's fabulous.

**Solis:** And what does she like to do?

**Gaona:** Oh everything. Flying the trapeze, she does all these aerial arts that are incredible; she's phenomenal really for her age. She was born, it's like they say she got *sadas* in her veins [Laughs].

**Solis:** So your grandpa taught you and your brothers how to do everything?

**Gaona:** No, my father. My grandpa taught my father, but my father, he kept the tradition with us and we loved it, we enjoyed it. We said, "I want to be a part of that. I want to." It's fun, you know. At the time, we were really superheroes. Doing all these crazy things and it was amazing. Flying and doing triples and quadruples and everything in the air. My father was a catcher and then after my father, my brother became the catcher, so you know. But the show must go on. And we had fun. It was great.

**Solis:** Can you describe to me what a typical show night would be like?

**Gaona:** A typical show night— You better be ready for the show! The lights go on, the music goes on, and you better be focused. But it was fantastic because, you know, you can't describe it. You have to live it. And that's what I saw when I saw a circus afterwards. I didn't realize how looking at it from the other side was. How thrilling it was to see all these performers performing and I said, "Isn't that funny? I did that all my life, but now I can feel what the audience feels." And I think that's one of the things that's very rewarding to accomplish something and then see it through someone else. And that was me watching the show. But I used to do it. I used to be in the ring all the time. Now I'm watching from behind the seats and it's great really. There's nothing like circus. You have gymnastics, you have theater, but the circus is incredible. The arts, the performing circus arts is amazing. And in gymnastic, you go to the Olympics if you want to become an Olympic champion but you're an individual. But in the circus you have a group to do things together and enjoy. And I think that's one of the things. I watch a gymnast and I say, "Wow, I got my brothers and we got a team together." And so it's supportive.

**Solis:** So there's a lot of teamwork involved in the circus?

**Gaona:** Oh yeah! I mean there has to be. When it's a big group you have to be a part of it, you know. You have to click together and you all have to work together. And it's nice. I believe it's one of the beautiful things; to know that you are performing and you're trusting in the catcher and you're trusting in the person who's giving you the trapeze to get back so. You got to be, you know, right on.

**Solis:** Did you always work with your brothers?

**Gaona:** Yes, yes I did. It was—

**Solis:** Can you imagine trusting anyone else?

**Gaona:** Well I see it with a lot of people. Once you do a show, you get used to it. But there's nothing like family. It's great, I'm going to be in the hands of my brother. And my brother is going to be together with me. And that's what I think. You grow up with that, and if you lose that, you feel funny. Where's my family? But you get through it.

**Solis:** You said your brother lives right next to you.

**Gaona:** Yeah!

**Solis:** Do all your brothers and sisters live next to you?

**Gaona:** We all live around. Yeah, they all live here.

**Solis:** And, did you all grow up here? And summers in Mexico?

**Gaona:** Yeah, summers in Mexico. No, summers here. And we used to go back and forth in school in Mexico. And come for the summer here to join my dad. And then you start growing up and you said, "Well, what do you want to do? I want to do some homeschooling." I let my mother teach me and I went to a correspondence school and this is what I wanted to do and that was it. I chose my career. And actually, we did choose our career. It's nice. By travelling with the show, with the circus, with the company it was like a little united nations. They came from all over the world. So you got 350 people involved in this little world, travelling from city to city. And speaking all different languages. A better education than that you cannot buy. You have to live it. And that was neat.

**Solis:** How many places have you travelled to?

**Gaona:** Oh my gosh! A lot. We did a world tour, which we performed. We went to six months in Australia, six months in Tokyo, Japan. From there went to South America. Argentina, Colombia, all of South America, Brazil. Back to Europe, Germany, Belgium, France, Sweden for six months. So tours everywhere. So you lived the culture. You lived everyone's culture. All these Slavic language, Russia you know Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia. It's nice because most of the performers knew. We knew each other. We're working with Ringling. But then they go home and you get to see them in their own home and environment, you know. So that's nice. It's just like you! You know, you're now at the college here. Your home is Puerto Rico but you have a home here because you're now studying.

**Solis:** So would you say you have a home almost everywhere in the world?

**Gaona:** Well, if you would have said to me, where's your home? I would have said everywhere. The world is my home. It's amazing. It was like that. One summer in

Sweden. Six months. Go to Paris. Five months in Paris, France, Switzerland. That's another, because every country has their national circus. So the national circus would love to have the Flying Gaonas. And that was the beauty of it, you know. "Oh my gosh! Will you come with us? Will you come?" "Oh sure, that would be nice." So, it, it was a ride! [Chuckles]

**Solis:** What was your favorite and least favorite part about traveling?

**Gaona:** Least?! I don't think I have a least. I loved it. I mean— Oh! Going to the checkpoints [Chuckles] "Take your shoes off!" I mean, they do that now. But everything was an exciting moment. And those times going to Moscow, to Russia, to checkpoints. You go to every country. Your passport—I thought that was fascinating. How they controlled everything. And then, yet, you're performing for all those people. In Sweden—You see the culture of the people. South America and Puerto Rico; the people go wild when they see something in the circus that's exciting and they applaud. But in Japan they just go like [Gestures], because that's just what they do. They're expressing themselves. Not clapping, or ah! you know. That's another culture you get to see. Like in Bulgaria. In Bulgaria to say yes is *da!* [Shakes head] *Da!* Instead of saying *da*, [Nods head] they go *dah* [Shakes head]! You see. It's no but it's yes. And to no. It is *da* [Nods head]. It's incredible how the cultures are different. And it's fun because you learn all that.

**Solis:** Did you ever get to meet the audience after the performance?

**Gaona:** No, they wanted to meet us, [Laughs] that's the fun part. One of my biggest fan that I used to be growing up. You know, when you're a kid and you have an idol at the age of fourteen. And that idol grew up with me. And I learned about music and I sang and I enjoyed it. He was a part of my life. And then the most beautiful part of this was when he wanted to meet me after he saw me performing. And you know who that was? Paul McCartney, the Beatles. So that was a big thing, you know, "I want to meet Tito." And after that we 'came nice friends and I see his shows with Wings when he changed. And he came to see us perform when he did his last White Album with the Beatles. It was New York City. It was the last show. He came to see it. And that was neat.

**Solis:** That's really cool.

**Gaona:** And then he opened the show with his new band Wings in Madison Square Garden where we were. So that was nice. So all these little things like that, one after another, that's the fun part of it. And if I could start it all over again I would. I would do it again. There's no such life. And they pay you for it! [Laughs] So think about that!

**Solis:** Do you have one performance that stands out from the rest? Maybe one performance you liked a little bit more than the others?

**Gaona:** Oh well yeah! The most important performance was in Monte Carlo. For Prince Rimier and Grace Kelly. The prince of Monaco and the princess of Monaco and they have a circus festival that competes the whole world participates. One act, two acts from all over the world. So that was an incredible show and to be able to say could we make it? Could we win something? I don't know. I didn't think about winning. I just wanted to participate. But we did win the Golden Clown, that was like the Oscars of circus and it was beautiful. It was something that you can't buy. You have to win it. And that was what we did. We won it.

**Solis:** What, um, what was your routine to win the Golden Clown? Do you remember what you did?

**Gaona:** Oh my gosh! We had a, I mean—It was an act, it was an incredible act. You start off with a triple, a summersault, you start off with so many different tricks you know. And the final trick is bouncing back to the trapeze sitting down. That was like a big close of the act. It was fabulous. But that show, I would say it would be one of the best shows you kind of dream for, you know. And once you do it, wow, it's just a dream come true. And the show must go on and every show and every day. For example, with Ringling you perform 672 shows a year. So imagine doing a triple somersault, just a triple somersault, 500— for 620- 672 shows a year. So how many turns is that? And then you go on, and for many years, fifteen years. So I kind of did a lot of turns in my life, okay?

**Solis:** Do you remember—

**Gaona:** And I'm still normal [Laughs]!

**Solis:** Do you remember learning those turns? Do you remember—

**Gaona:** Of course! The trampoline. Oh my god we used to love jumping on the trampoline and learning those tricks. And we jumped and jumped all day long. And practice and practice and practice. So I've been jumping and turning all my life, okay? And it's fun. It is a ride.

**Solis:** So you said your father taught you how—these tricks right?

**Gaona:** Yeah! Papa was a coach. He started with us himself! He was a Charlie Chaplin of the trapeze. He did comedy. Fabulous. Watching my father was an enjoyable thing. Enjoyable to see him. And I laugh all the time. He did an incredible low trapeze act with comedy. And so I looked at him like, wow my dad is an idol to me. But then, when we got involved he was our coach. And we actually learned together actually. We actually experimented and it clicked.

**Solis:** Did he choreograph your routines?

**Gaona:** Yeah! You know, we were all kind of, What do you think about this? What do you think about that? Oh well that this, But at the end he would say, “Why don’t we do it like this and like that.” Of course, the experience—“Okay, yes sir. We’ll do it that way.”

**Solis:** Did you do comedy?

**Gaona:** Um. Not really, he was a specialist. The way he did it was incredible. So I just let it. I went to serious. And it was fun. It was a lot of fun.

**Solis:** How about your mother?

**Gaona:** My mother?

**Solis:** Did she approve of the circus?

**Gaona:** My mother was always scared about us getting hurt. She was always thinking, “Oh my god, my kids.” But she saw that we did very well. And we were fine. And it was great, it was great. She just accepted it and she enjoyed it too.

**Solis:** Did you ever teach her any tricks?

**Gaona:** Mom? No. She says, “I can be home and cook for you guys.” And that was great but tricks? Uh-uh. She had good tricks up her sleeve; cooking for us. Oh! “Today you’re going to eat this.” Terrific! Fantastic! But she was a character. She loved it too.

**Solis:** Did you perform in Sarasota?

**Gaona:** Oh yes. In Venice, Sarasota. Actually mostly, Ringling was here. Just about a mile away the arena. And we practiced there all the time and performed. In Sarasota I did, before, when we used to come with the first show. I was only twelve years old. So we did perform all along here. And if you ever think about maybe— [Dog gets up from the couch to move to the other room] that was Puddy. But anyway. What I’m trying to say is when you being to perform and you are performing in many cities and many shows you meet so many people which is nice.

**Solis:** How is the circus community in Sarasota? You said it was a circus city?

**Gaona:** Well I mean, yes. Before Sarasota used to be like my home now. There used to be riggings in each property because every performer came to stay away from the cold and be with Ringling. And Ringling was always like, you drive down the highway and the streets and you see everybody practicing in the air. And that was nice. Because they were all practicing their acts because of the weather. You wanted to be warm and it was cold up north. [To dog]Are you okay? Are you okay Puddy? Oh my gosh! And so that’s it. That’s one of the parts. That was nice.

**Solis:** Um. About the arena. You said they wanted to take it down. And you don't believe in that.

**Gaona:** Well we tried for a long time. But you know there was something about it. And I think it was the wrong time, the economy, it wasn't the right moment. The arena is what it was. It's a very, very important landmark of history. But for some reason I guess they don't understand what it is. You have to be involved with that. But we'll see.

**Solis:** Did it mean a lot to you?

**Gaona:** Well, of course! It means a lot because it was whole part of our life there. Right out here near in Venice. It was a home of Ringling Brothers. So it was a big thing, yeah. It'll be a shame when they take it down.

**Solis:** When are they gonna take it down?

**Gaona:** I don't know. I think this month or something.

**Solis:** And um, why did you decide to stay in Sarasota? Why did you decide to make your home Sarasota?

**Gaona:** No, we didn't decide. It felt natural, you know. Just like now if you decide to live in Denver, Colorado— "Oh, I'm going to go to LA." I think the work takes you. That's where you choose, you know? Like, you did! I'm going down to college. But where? I'll go to Sarasota. But your roots are in San Juan, Puerto Rico. And that's why I think everybody has their own root. I mean, my hometown was Mexico City Guadalajara, you know. But this was my home here from the beginning because of work.

**Solis:** Do you go visit Guadalajara often?

**Gaona:** Yeah. It is fun, you go and it's another culture. You have fun. You see how it is. So it's nice, it's interesting wherever you go. I love travelling.

**Solis:** Yeah, you just came back from a trip—

**Gaona:** Denver, Colorado. I was there two weeks ago. I was in Salt Lake City. Ringling was there, that's why and then I went to Denver, came back home. And then tomorrow, next week, I go to Cleveland, Ohio. So, you know, see how the act is going. See if everything is fine. Just doing some checks.

**Solis:** So now you oversee certain acts?



**Gaona:** Yes, especially the flying trapeze. It's what I oversee. I put a show together with it and it's exciting.

**Solis:** Do you choreograph any of the acts recently?

**Gaona:** Ah, you know we love to choreograph. I like the ideas of the act, I put the acts together but then the production has their own choreography, things, and music. So we leave that to them. They're professional to know what they want, what kind of music, and what kind of lighting. But we do the act. And then this is it. Now you polish it off however you want.

**Solis:** Would you say circus has changed?

**Gaona:** Circus has changed. Now they want to take the animals away. And that's another thing that has changed. The kids loved the animals. To see an elephant for a little boy. It's like me, I remember seeing an elephant. It's like seeing a dinosaur now for me but you know it is something to see an elephant. But it's just, changes has come through that. But the circus still fights to have their animals. It's beau—that's what makes it the greatest show on earth. But of course you have, like, Cirque du Soleil that's like a theatre circus. You know, they have. It's beautiful too, you know. The circus will never die. As long as there is a child born every day the circus will never die. And that's the way it is. Have you seen my little buddy here [Referencing the dog]? They can tell you if they could speak. They made a lot of people laugh. So anyway, that's a part of life. If you ever get to St. Armand's circle maybe you can go, you remember to see the little ring of feign and you'll find us. Tito Gaona and then you'll read about all the performers that lived in the area. And so that's a big tradition too.

**Solis:** And was being in a circus like being in a community? Did the flying trapeze get along with say the clowns?

**Gaona:** Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, here's a clown getting married with a trapeze artist. Or here the clown is a clown but outside the ring he's a person. And he's dating this wonderful lady who is an aerialist. And the clown becomes a clown. And she becomes an aerialist. But when the shows done they are together. And just—oh you can even—oh look how in love they are. So that's the beauty of it. Everybody; it's a whole community it's a whole family. Traveling together and um so, it's a community, a very special community.

**Solis:** I was talking to someone and they said when they were growing up in Sarasota they could see um lots of members of the circus walking around and practicing their acts. But now, you don't see that as often.

**Gaona:** No now, it's a different change. It's changed a lot. Permitting; if you're gonna put a rigging up you have to have a permit. It's changed a lot you know. You can't even do nothing to your house. You have to go get a permit. So that's what it is. It's

totally different than before, you know. So that's why, you know, those days were very special. And these days are modern and different. The only thing I don't accept is I see everybody with phones. They forgot the communication of looking at each other. Nobody trusts each other because the only thing they trust is their phone because their looking at it all the time. So if I look at you, who's? And I don't even know who you are. And that's what I see a lot in airports and I see everywhere. It's beautiful, I can't knock it, but it's just taking a lot of contact with people. Now they all get married in the internet and they don't know who the hell they're gonna get married to but they're in love. And so you know those are things, that's not the truth of life.

**Solis:** How would you say this lack of communication has affected the circus?

**Gaona:** I think it has. I think it has affected a lot of stuff. I think it's like they have their own entertainment thing in their hand. And that's the texting and the Facebook and all that. It takes away from the real life the real, you know, thing. And the day went by and the day is over. But if you were involved all day long. You know, sending a text or being involved in Facebook, don't you think. I mean it's something you should all think about. The young people today. I just don't see they see each other anymore. I believe in college. Isn't it the same in college? I mean it's hard to: "Oh, I'll talk to you later. I gotta, uh, see you later, okay?" No communication anymore.

**Solis:** Yeah, sometimes, I'll see a group of people sitting down eating but none of them are talking to each other.

**Gaona:** Yeah, and that's what's sad about this. Because you know you're missing out on life. You know you want to be able to say—you know, I mean, you look at those things and it's affecting—it does affect a lot. It's a pollution of your [Laughs] you know what I mean?

**Solis:** It also, um, definitely affects performance. Because now you can open up just a clip of a performance from the circus on your phone and you don't actually get to go see it and experience it. Do you think there's a difference between seeing it on your phone and seeing it in the circus?

**Gaona:** This is the same thing when you go to the movie theatre. You see it on the big screen, you have friends around, you share a movie. But to see it on the phone. You're like I'll see it later but you never get to see it all because you get bored. So it's a big difference. It's like—and I believe there's more problems with the phone, um, living with the phone because it's all problems. You're breaking up with somebody or you're gossiping. It just complicates the life. But not realistically. In college you better start focusing on what you do. So that's where you know. But I think that's one of the things you see a lot when you go to the circus now. Okay, they tell you to turn it off at the movie theatre but in the circus they sit down and here's the kid and the family at the circus. And the teenagers or the mother are not watching the show.

They're texting. It's incredible! It's amazing isn't it? So, but that's kind of a little bit of what I see. But the circus is the circus. The kids go, the parents go and they always say I'm gonna take the kids to the circus. But they don't say I'm gonna go to the circus. It's like childish or something? But no, it's an incredible art form. Discipline and fascinating.

**Solis:** Yeah, it's a very unique experience.

**Gaona:** Yeah, you know, if you ever go see any circus. You know, Ringling Brothers or you go see you know it like, whoa, blows you away. It's like these guys on a motorcycle; eight on a globe. You know a globe that goes around. Eight motorcycles inside. That's incredible. That is amazing and that's a thrill. You know, it's a wonder of the world. Have eight guys on a small globe with eight motorcycles. And they just got by each other by that much. That's amazing.

**Solis:** How long does it take to set up a show?

**Gaona:** Now that's another story. That's when they have the work crew. They come in, they set up, they work late. Like, let's say we finish everything on Sunday, they tear down everything, they put everything on the train, the train goes to the next city, they unload. They unload the elephants, they unload everything. So the train is a mile long. So think about it. And just unloading setting up for Thursd—Wednesday performance so they got Monday and Tuesday to re-put everything up and work till the weekend. Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And tear it down again. But you see that's the working—that's the crew. They do that but they sleep all seven days. They don't do circus but they know how to move the show. So if you don't feel it.

**Solis:** What was your last performance with your brothers?

**Gaona:** My last performance was in Brazil. Yeah, it was beautiful. It was one of those shows we, uh, actually we never stopped because we couldn't do it. We only said to ourselves why don't we go have a vacation? We never got a vacation in 45 years. Nonstop. Performing and performing and performing and enjoying what I love the most. But we decided why don't we go home and have a break or a vacation. We loved it so much and that was it. No more contracts no more nothing that's it. Gonna enjoy this and that was all. So that was the last performance; in Brazil.

**Solis:** That's nice. Um. Did you ever have any conflicts with your brothers while you were working with them?

**Gaona:** Eh, you know we never really thought about that. We were always happy because we were performing. Um, you know I lived in the train. I love the train, I loved traveling. They loved, um, being in a motor coach or being in a home. And you know everybody had their own life. But when we came together to perform we were

all happy to see other. And then we just, "See you tomorrow," you know? And there was never time for conflicts. It was a lot of, a lot of good stuff.

**Solis:** Um. How long did you have to practice beforehand? Before a show?

**Gaona:** Practice or warming up? [Chuckles] Practice? We practiced a lot when we started. And then after we would practice after the show if we needed to. If we didn't, the act every day is there, you know, the performance. But practice at the beginning was a lot. But you just got to watch your diet. You just got to stay in shape. You got to, because you know that's one of the things you know you were careful of. So—

**Solis:** When you were traveling did you only have time to do performances or did you ever like to go around and look at the cities?

**Gaona:** Well, I don't know if you realize it. But we come to the show. Let's say this is the seven o'clock show at night, the evening show. You have all day free. You don't do nothing, all day free. Go see whatever is in the city, whatever you know enjoy. And go to work and only work five minutes. And so, you only work five minutes a day now. Tell me, where are you going to feel that better now. Of course, now a days more production more this. But in my times, I worked only one, two, three tricks which only took about a minute and 2 seconds. And so I performed three minutes. My brother two minutes and the other one two minutes. So you perform seven minutes or 8 minutes a show. And you like doing that. So that was a big thing. And then you get out you close you know in the evening. Rest, then another seven o'clock show. Or maybe two shows at four and seven. So you come in, you get ready, you do your thing. You perform. You see, you don't have to change the act because the act—it's the people that change. The audience changes all the time. So your act's there. But if you want to do something extra you do it for fun. And it's like, you blow everybody away. The audience doesn't realize I did something new but the performances—the whole circus is like wow, you know, someone did something today, it was spectacular. Oh yeah, I do that every once in a while when I have fun. But that's the exciting, having the people is exciting. It's important.

**Solis:** So you feed off the audience's energy?

**Gaona:** Absolutely! You know if I'm seeing you or you and it's twenty thousand people I'm focusing with you three of you. So I'm having a good time with everybody but I'm focusing with you. And that's what made it easy for me. You know, it was fun, it was fun, and then you know, not ignore them, but you got a lot of people watching you. You're focusing on someone and they give you feedback and they're enjoying your work and that's how it is.

**Solis:** And, um, your costume is at the front door right?

**Gaona:** Yes. Yes. The capes? That was fun. You come in with the capes and the music and the lights and everything. You come in and you take the capes off like a matador and climb up.

**Solis:** Who made your capes?

**Gaona:** They were made in New York. Um, yeah, we had a lot of beautiful capes. All colors and it was a big thing, you know. It's like, yeah, it was exciting. Sometimes you feel like, okay, I hope that cape can fly. [Laughs] like a flying carpet. No, but it was flying behind us, it was nice.

**Solis:** So, um, you guys coordinated costumes your brothers?

**Gaona:** Yeah, it's funny. Yes, um, my sister would design her costumes, and I had at the time. Wouldn't this be nice? Design a new costume—[Phone rings] Puddy is amazing she's just here enjoying.

**Solis:** So what did your sister do in the circus?

**Gaona:** She flew with us. You see it. Those are the capes [Points at the capes]

**Solis:** So it was three brothers and one sister?

**Gaona:** Yeah.

**Solis:** But you said it was five of your siblings?

**Gaona:** No it was four of us. We were the flying Gaonas. And the other one was the walking Gaona, the fisherman Gaona. They did something different.

**Solis:** So your father was comedy. He was a comedy act, right? So what did your great grandfather, I mean your grandfather, do?

**Gaona:** My great grandfather was also in the business. And then my grandfather and then my father. They were all in show business. From singers, bullfighters. It was a big family. Tradition goes back. But they passed it on. My grandfather passed it on to dad, my dad passed it on to us. But my father decided to be the Chaplin of the trapeze. Fabulous! Nobody could forget that act. It was amazing.

**Solis:** Do you guys ever have family reunions? I bet it's crazy!

**Gaona:** Oh yeah! We do get together. The nice thing about it is because we live nearby we have time to see each other. But anyway, that's it. When you travel, even the dog is with you. They like to go. They live in the train. I used to have my pet before Puddy. This is the third Puddy of the same family tree. The first Puddy was twelve years old, the second was fourteen years old, this one is only five. But they're

traditional. From the same family tree. But they know when you're on the road. They know when you're leaving, when you're coming. It's incredible! I'm gonna tell you the story. If you lock your dog in the closet. And leave him in the closet for ten days. Then you put your wife in the closet for ten days, ten days later you come you open the closet the dog still loves you the same way. When you open the other door, you better run! [Laughs] The dogs love you no matter what. They know when you're leaving, when you're coming, they're part of the circus.

**Solis:** Did the circus have any pets?

**Gaona:** Oh yeah! Of course. Everybody has a pet. Some guys have the leopards and the lions they perform like that guy over there [Points to painting] it is what it is. It's a life. What else could you call a circus if you didn't call it a circus? Do you know why the circus was called the circus? Well, a coliseum in Rome was a circus. The gladiators, the lions, man versus lions, tigers, bulls. [Front door bell rings] So what I'm saying about the coliseum. The coliseum is in Rome. So for Romans the entertainment was the circus. So the Roman circus it was the gladiators versus the lions, they had their entertainment a circus. And because of the circle, was the ring, the circle became the circus. So the Roman circus was a big thing. It was another form of entertainment. Horses riding horses, chariots, gladiators. Everybody who could make it to Rome. They knew they wanted to you know. So that was incredible when you look at it.

**Solis:** Yeah, it dates back to a long time ago.

**Gaona:** Oh yes, yes. So the circus has always been beautiful. I think it's something really special. There's nothing like it. Laughter, laughing. Go to Solei, go to Ringling.

**Solis:** And it's definitely played a big role in your family.

**Gaona:** Yes. Very big, very big. Life is good. Life is a circus. You go to Sarasota. In Sarasota you got the Ringling Museum. Everything is circus related. Because it's a fact. Then you get new people who don't understand this. They want to change things because they don't understand the tradition. [Phone rings]

**Solis:** So, do you believe this tradition should stay true to itself? Or do you believe it should change?

**Gaona:** The circus?

**Solis:** Are you welcome to change? Mhmm

**Gaona:** I don't think it'll change. I don't think it's going to change because, like I told you before, as long as a child is born the circus is magical. If you look at entertainment, live entertainment, if you really look at it or think about it where you can see something so different like the circus. Thrilling, exciting, and everything.

**Solis:** And did you meet your wife at the circus?

**Gaona:** Yeah, she danced in ballet, classical jazz, and she used to choreograph for the circus in Brazil. And we met so we continued, it was nice.

**Solis:** Did you meet her in one of your shows?

**Gaona:** Yeah, as a matter of fact they were invited to come be a part of our show with the ballet company, and they did, decorating the whole acts with dancing and ballet. It became a part of the circus. They used to come every weekend and travel all over Brazil. It was a nice touch to the circus. With circus ballet and everything very nice choreography with the show acts.

**Solis:** Do you take your daughter to the circus?

**Gaona:** Oh yeah! She loves it. She's a circus on her own. She is amazing.

**Solis:** How old is she?

**Gaona:** Victoria is going to be eleven next week. And she does all the circus arts. She's fabulous, really. She started to fly at the age of one and a half. Can you believe that? She saw it and she went. And I took her up and she flew way up there. And that's her first catch there [Points to picture].

**Solis:** When did you start flying?

**Gaona:** I was about eight years old. I was eight years old when I did my first show—performance. And that went on and on and on and better. It was great.

**Solis:** How was your first performance? Was it scary?

**Gaona:** It was fabulous! It was like, whoa, exciting. It was exciting. I remember I came down and they bought me a beautiful bicycle. It was great! I said, I'll do more. It was nice. The way we did and the way my parents did it with us. It was great.

**Solis:** Is that the way your family bonded?

**Gaona:** I would say yes. I think we bonded because our lives, everyday was an exciting day. What are we going to do today? Are we going to make something? You got to create something. And it was fun. Every day was different. Creating something for the act and I think I can do this trick and my father said you think you can? Yes. Well let's see. Let's try it. So that kept going. It was fantastic. Then you take all that. All that that you practiced you got to store it. The same thing you do today. You got to store everything in here. That's when you begin to see how muscle memory

works. The more you practice, the more muscle memory goes on and your body does it on its own.

**Solis:** Who was your idol growing up? Who did you look up to?

**Gaona:** Well, I mean. Growing up it was the Beatles at the time. You know, they were the Beatles at the time and, wow, they were great. Paul McCartney and all the Beatles they were your idols. But when I got the thrill he wanted to meet me because he saw me performing in New York in Madison Square Garden. He wanted to meet me and I just heard he was there but I didn't know. I was blown away. And when he said, "I want to meet Tito," I couldn't believe it, so imagine that.

**Solis:** What was that like? Meeting him?

**Gaona:** It was amazing. It was incredible. I mean, he comes to tell you how wonderful you are, how special you are as a performer. And I said, you're the same. You're music, it's how it feels. It's show business.

**Solis:** That's amazing that you got to meet your idol.

**Gaona:** Yeah, and many, many performers in the business. A lot of performers, like Robin Williams. He used to be a good friend and he used to perform as a clown in the apple circus in New York with us. Robert De Niro loved the circus. He was always in the circus. So you've got all the actors of the past. I think it was like a family, it was show business and they understood circus. They had this thing inside them. Like, wow, these are the real performers.

**Solis:** Did you always know this is what you wanted to be? Is there anything else you wanted to be when you were little?

**Gaona:** No. I think I woke up, I saw my father and at the age of five I saw the fabulous world of the circus. And that was into me right away. I wanna be that, I wanna do that, I wanna do anything I love. So in other words, you grow into it. Because if I would have been older it might have been different. But you kind of grow into it.

**Solis:** How many languages do you speak? I'm curious.

**Gaona:** Mostly Slavic languages. Hungarian, Bulgarian. Because of the Ringling show, you know, ten languages. It's nice communicating with people. I love that more than anything. It was very special to do that. You come in and nobody understands each other but you teach them English, they teach you their language, and you're friends. And that's nice, communicating.

**Solis:** Have you had any other pets?



**Gaona:** No, no. I've always had dogs. They're the best friend.

**Solis:** They seem to have their own personality. All of them.

**Gaona:** Yeah.

**Solis:** They're all different.

**Gaona:** Is that it? Do you think you have enough?

**Solis:** Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to say? Anything about any topic?

**Gaona:** No, we talked mostly about the circus and all that.

**Solis:** I'd like to take pictures.

**Gaona:** Yeah, you can take pictures and now you know a little bit of what it is. [Looking through album] This is Richie, my younger brother. And then see here growing up with the trampoline.

**Solis:** This is you with the trampoline? And your brothers?

**Gaona:** Yeah, see my little brother Richie? These are my brothers.

**Solis:** What are your brothers' names?

**Gaona:** Richie, Armando, my father Victor, and myself Tito. But see, that was it: traveling, enjoying, and learning. Then here, explaining how things went. And Richie getting ready for the show. He started young too. See? And then starting to grow up.

**Solis:** How old were you guys here?

**Gaona:** Maybe I was about thirty-five. Richie was about twenty-eight. Charla was about my age too. See the capes?

**Solis:** Who came up with the idea for the capes?

**Gaona:** It was a traditional thing. See? Flying for the hands and the triple somersault.

**Solis:** So what would you say is your hardest trick?

**Gaona:** The hardest trick? Oh my god, so many. The double-double. It was like a twist. It was a big trick but it was fun. The triple and the quadruple. You know? A lot of good stuff. And that's us in Sweden and that's Alex, Richie's son. The generations go on.

**Solis:** Do you think Alex and your daughter will eventually—

**Gaona:** They did already. They flew together in California about two months ago.

**Solis:** Oh!

**Gaona:** Isn't that amazing? He caught Victoria. And so that's the nice thing about it. See the capes?

**Solis:** Those costumes are beautiful.

**Gaona:** Yeah. Maybe this [holding album] could help you.

**Solis:** Who made this?

**Gaona:** Richie, my brother. He made this because it has everybody's birthdays.

**Solis:** How did you celebrate each other's birthdays in the circus?

**Gaona:** Lots of surprises. Because everybody knew everybody. It was a lot of people.

**Solis:** About how many people?

**Gaona:** In Ringling, about two hundred and fifty. That's a lot of people!

**Solis:** Wow, yeah! That's a lot of people. Traveling with that many people had to be hard. I thought traveling with a family of five was hard.

**Gaona:** Well, it's like I said. Everybody had their own thing but when you get together it's nice.

**Solis:** These pictures are perfect!

**Gaona:** Yeah, I think this is good for you want. [Phone rings]

—End of interview—