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## Animal welfare questions return with Dalton Lions Club circus run

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DALTON — After years of protests surrounding circuses in town that use animals, Allen Harris made the Lions Club of Dalton an offer last September.

Harris, the CEO and chief investment officer of Berkshire Money Management, offered to cover the Lions Club's potential lost revenue from circus ticket sales — to the tune of \$25,000 — and help them come up with new fundraising strategies.

"I've got to start somewhere," Harris said. "And starting local made sense to me. I love animals, and I don't want to see them abused. I don't think [the Lions Club] is pro-animal abuse. I just don't think they're looking at this in the same way."

The Lions Club has sponsored various circuses in town every year for over two decades.

The club rejected the offer within a week after Harris contacted them, he said.

Business-wise, hosting a circus that includes animals isn't the best idea — most people don't want to see animal acts, Harris said.

The Lions Club could make even more money for its charitable ventures by moving away from circuses with animals, he said.

"From a business perspective, it's a poor business model," he said. "It's working for [the Lions Club], but it could work so much better for them."

All the Lions Club's members voted not to accept the offer, said club member Dan McGinnis Sr.

"We've had a circus ... for 25 years, never had no problems," he said.

The club did not want to be dictated to by outside interests, he said in an email.

"If a poll was conducted in Berkshire County, I am sure that there would be overwhelming support for our circus program," he said in the email.

Over time, Harris said he's become more educated and aware of animal abuse.

He supported a petition at Dalton's annual town meeting in 2015 that would have forbidden the use of non-domesticated animals for public entertainment in circuses, carnivals and other traveling events in town.

Voters rejected that petition 184 to 92.

Many people are attached to circuses as venues for animal entertainment, said Sheryl Becker, president of Western Massachusetts Animal Rights Advocates, an advocacy group.

"The older generation — they feel like it's necessary to keep a tradition alive, even though it's cruel," she said.

The life animals live as members of a traveling circus is cruel in itself, she said.

"[Circus animals are] traveling constantly, from show to show," she said. "They're treated horribly. Most people, if they knew the facts, would not be there."

Becker and other advocates plan to voice their opposition to the Zerbini Family Circus' second year in Dalton with several protests prior to the shows on Monday, July 10 and Tuesday, July 11 — both days the circus is in town.

Becker has extensively protested circuses in Dalton and other locations.

"Our goal is just like every other protest — to educate people," she said. "We are getting the message across because the attendance [at circuses] is seriously declining. Because people are getting it. They're finally understanding how cruel and unnecessary a circus with animals is."

Marnie Meyers, of Berkshire Advocates for Animals, also plans to protest the circus.

"Animals inherently are not given a good life when they're in a traveling show," she said. "From what we know and have seen in the life of animals in the entertainment realm, it's not fair to them. It doesn't fit what their natural lifestyle should be and is intended to be."

Even a good life for a traveling show animal is comparable to what a human would experience if they were given the best food, entertainment and medical care but made to live in a small closet, she said.

"In general, the life of a circus animal is not humane," she said. "It's an entertainment system of the past. A lot of the old circus ways have gone. There's a lot more focus now on remarkable, magical human acts."

For McGinnis, animals are still a prized part of circus entertainment.

"Our circus has always had animals because that's what the public wants to see," he said.

Animals in circuses are very well cared-for, he said.

"We've been to countless circuses, and I've never, [ever] seen any animal abused," he said. "You have cell phones today. You have iPhones today. If there was any abuse, it would be reported immediately."

Videos posted online claiming to depict abuse of circus animals are "baloney," he said. They've either been doctored or were taken a long time ago, he said.

McGinnis is the president of Tent #172 of the Circus Fans of America. Minus expenses, the Lions Club's proceeds of the circus ticket sales will go to the club's community service efforts and the Dalton American Legion restoration fund.

Before 2016 — the first year the Zerbini Family Circus came to Dalton — the Lions Club hosted the Kelly Miller Circus for five years.

As of April 2015, the U.S. Department of Agriculture had a long list of complaints and allegations on file regarding Kelly Miller's treatment of animals between 1992 and 2014, the Eagle previously reported.

Online inspection reports for Kelly Miller Brothers Circus LTD, based in Oklahoma, found no issues of noncompliance in inspections conducted in April 2014, March 2015 and January 2016. The company's website also claims the circus exceeds all animal welfare standards set by the USDA.

The USDA requires circuses to submit to surprise inspections regarding their care and treatment of animals, said Mike Jones, office manager for Zerbini Family Circus, which is based in the state of Florida. Animals must also be examined by licensed veterinarians on a regular basis.

Animals aren't the biggest part of the Zerbini Family Circus. But they're cared for even before the human performers, Jones said.

"The animals are the first [ones] that get their water, that get their bed put down," he said. "It's the animals even before the performers."

For circuses that abuse animals, the cause is often bad examples passed down from family members, he said.

"It does happen, unfortunately," he said. "[Circuses are] something that is almost a family business. They saw their father or mother training [animals] that way. It's the only way they know. It's just ignorance."

The circus hasn't had any issues of noncompliance concerning animal abuse, Jones said. This could not be independently confirmed by the Eagle, as inspection reports for Zerbini Family Circus could not be located on the USDA website.

Reports were removed from the website due to privacy issues and are starting to be re-uploaded, according to a USDA employee. Voicemails left for the freedom of information office of the USDA's animal and plant health inspection service went unreturned.

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