

Not everyone loves the circus — U.S.-based PETA protests

by Dominik Kurek
Oakville Beaver Staff

The Shrine Circus opened on the grounds of Oakville Entertainment Centrum Thursday, while U.S.-based animal rights activist group PETA was calling on organizers to stop the show's tiger act.

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) has not organized any protests of the Oakville venue, but wrote to Centrum operator, PenEquity Realty Corporation, asking it to bar the tiger act, saying the tiger act's contractor, U.S.-based Hawthorn Corporation, has a history of animal abuse. PETA claims Hawthorn accumulated \$272,500 in U.S. Department of Agriculture penalties for Animal Welfare Act violations, has had its licences suspended twice and has had to relinquish its animals numerous times.

Illinois-based Hawthorn Corporation would not respond to media questions by phone, instead asking for questions to be sent to it by fax. The company did not return a faxed request by publication deadline; however, Mike Aiardo of Hawthorn referred the *Beaver* to circus operator TZ Productions (Zerbini Circus) for further comment.

The circus said the allegations against its sub-contracted act are unfounded.

Larry Solheim, general manager of TZ Productions, which is putting on the Shrine Circus in Oakville, said the tiger trainers they contract go above and beyond requirements to ensure

their animals' wellbeing.

"We chose this act, based on its merits with these trainers," said Solheim. "It has nothing really to do with Hawthorn Corporation because these people are working to our standards and they've met or exceeded everything that we've asked of them. That's the most important thing. These people are the best of the best. They just happen to work for Hawthorn."

Solheim said the tigers are cared for 24/7, they are in good health, get regular exercise, and they get social time. He said the circus travels less than 10,000 miles per year, and when it's on the roads, it makes special accommodations so that the animals are not in transport vehicles for long periods of time.

"Our reputation is everything," Solheim said of the Zerbini Circus. "If we had an incident or if we had an allegation, it would be the end of our careers. This is the 250th anniversary of this family in the circus. You have to look back at 250 years of success. Why would we jeopardize that by bringing animals or trainers who aren't qualified or abuse their animals?"

When contacted by the *Beaver*, PenEquity offered no comment.

PETA is contacting all venues and Shriners organizations along the Shrine Circus tour, which is going through southern Ontario and Québec.

"We believe consumers have a right to know what they're supporting when they purchase a ticket to the circus," said Carney Anne Chester, lawyer for PETA. She added that PETA is opposed to all use of animals in circuses.

Locally, the Oakville & Milton Humane Society takes a similar stance.

"We are opposed to the capture and training and use of animals in circuses," said humane society spokesperson Brenda Dushko.

"The ethics of having animals performing tricks in circuses is certainly one that is top of many people's minds.

"We don't really believe circuses can shelter and care for animals in a way that provides for their social, behavioural and psychological needs. Their training methods are quite often negative so they're all things we would be opposed to."

The annual Shrine Circus is one of the largest

fraternal events sponsored by the Shriners, an international fraternity based on fun, fellowship and the Masonic principles of brotherly love, relief and truth.

It has a membership of approximately 340,000 in the U.S., Canada, Mexico and Panama.

Proceeds from the circus support the work of the Shriners in the community.

The Shriners are known for supporting children and families in need. Their work can be seen at the 22 Shriners Hospitals for Children around the world, one of which is located in Montreal, Quebec.

The Oakville Shrine Club is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

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