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April 24, 2013

Via Email

James M. Hughes, Potentate
Isis Shrine
336 South Santa Fe Avenue
Salina, KS 67401

Dear Mr. Hughes,

I am writing to you out of serious concern about the recent incident at the Isis Shrine Circus in which a tiger escaped from its handlers, wandered through the exhibition area and into a bathroom where a woman came face to face with the animal. I assure you that a tiger escape, no matter how "brief," is cause for grave concern. I speak as an expert on captive wildlife and as someone who has been working with dangerous wild animals for more than 30 years, including live appearances in film and television.

I am the president and co-founder of the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), which cares for captive wild animals rescued from circuses and from the entertainment and exotic pet industries. PAWS operates three sanctuaries located in Northern California and cares for over 100 animals, including 33 tigers, 8 elephants, African lions, bears, cougars, primates, and other exotic species. We are recognized internationally for providing leadership on the complex issues surrounding the care of captive wildlife, and we often assist regulatory agencies and elected officials on policy issues related to captive wild animals. PAWS serves on the California Department of Fish and Game's Advisory Committee on the Humane Care and Treatment of Wild Animals.

The way that staff at the Bicentennial Center and the Tarzan Zerbini Circus downplayed this incident was reprehensible and a disservice to the public. One media source reported that circus staff told the woman who encountered the tiger that the cat was well-trained and presented no risk. This could not be farther from the truth. No matter how highly trained a tiger may be, it remains a dangerous wild animal and poses a serious threat to the public. Children are especially at risk because they are easy targets for these powerful predators.

The trainers know, the circus knows, and the Shriners know it is pure luck that no one was injured or killed at the Bicentennial Center. There have been many incidents involving big cats that have ended in injuries and in human and animal deaths, including in circuses, zoos and other wildlife attractions. In fact, "highly trained" tigers have attacked and seriously injured their handlers – the very people who are presumed to have the most control of the animal.

Just this year, a tiger killed a young woman at big cat facility in California. And there have been numerous big cat attacks and escapes, including the San Francisco Zoo (one man killed, two others injured), the Cole Bros. Circus in

New York City (tiger was loose for 30 minutes), and the UniverSoul Circus (escapes in 2003 and 2004; in one incident schoolchildren were in the area where the tiger was loose). Costly legal actions have followed some incidents.

It is no surprise that big cats escape circuses, and it will happen again. Tigers are under a great deal of stress in circuses, due to prolonged confinement in small cages and the even smaller transfer cages in which they have little room to move. (In the wild, tigers have home ranges as large as 40 square miles.) They can spend 11 months of the year in this intense confinement, being trucked around the country from show to show. In addition, tigers are forced to perform unnatural tricks through physical violence, fear, and intimidation. They are often whipped and jabbed with long poles.

Traveling shows must repeatedly transport tigers to the arena for performances, and then transfer the cats from smaller "transfer cages" into and out of the performance enclosure, creating the possibility for escape. Circuses also rely on temporary, lightweight enclosures to contain these animals, many weighing in excess of 400 pounds.

There can be no justification for using tigers or other dangerous wild animals in circuses. Seeing tigers jump through a flaming hoop is not conservation and it is not education. In fact, it sends the wrong message to children about these highly endangered animals and the way that we should value and protect them.

Because of the grave threat that big cats and other dangerous wild animals present to the public, and because of the unnatural lifestyle forced on these animals in the circus, I urge the Shriners to consider hiring a circus that does not use wild animals. The risk is just too great for the public, and there is a much more positive message that can be sent to the children and adults supporting your good cause if you present a non-animal circus. Keep the clowns, acrobats and high wire acts, but it's time for the animals to be freed from Shrine circuses in the U.S.A.

I look forward to a response from you. I am happy to provide more information on our organization, the use of wildlife in entertainment, and alternatives to circuses that use wild animals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ed Stewart". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Ed Stewart
President and Co-founder, PAWS

cc: Imperial Potentate Alan W. Madsen
Shriners International Headquarters