

WILDLIFE CENTER FOUNDER SAYS SHE WAS FORCED OUT

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A barn owl rehabilitated by Dr. Belinda Burwell, founder of the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center in Millwood, flies above her head in the flight cage at the facility in December 2012. (Photo by Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star)

MILLWOOD — A controversy over staffing and leadership at the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center appears to be playing out publicly on Facebook and the editorial page of The Winchester Star.

Dr. Belinda Burwell, the veterinarian who founded the center 15 years ago to treat and rehabilitate injured wildlife, says on the center's Facebook page that she was told on Sept. 15 to "leave the center and not return.' I was never given a reason and have not received any formal notice terminating my contract," she wrote.

Burwell founded the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center as a medical hotline. In 2004, it became a physical presence, on land owned by her family's trust off Tilthammer Road in Clarke County.

The center served 117 animals during its first year, according to its Facebook page. That number grew to 1,880 in 2014.

While the goal is to return injured animals to the wild, those that are too badly injured to survive there are housed at the center and become "animal ambassadors" in public education programs.

Over the years, Burwell provided medical care to the center's inhabitants while raising money to keep the center operating and educating people on how to care for animals.

Now housed in an 800-square-foot cottage, a larger and more modern \$1.3 million building is currently under construction to house the medical facilities of the center and to provide more space for educational activities.

On its Facebook page, Lisa Goshen, chairwoman of the six-member board of directors of the wildlife center said in a post that Burwell resigned as director of the center to get a break from the long hours she put in.

Goshen said in a phone interview Monday that she could not talk about any of the details of the conflict over Burwell's status, but noted that Burwell had resigned last October as the executive director of the center, staying on as acting director until a new person could be hired.

In May, the board hired David Bancroft to take over those duties.

Burwell was then contracted to provide veterinary services until Dec. 31, 2015, Goshen said Monday.

A Facebook post by Goshen said Burwell would continue to serve on the board of directors.

In her post, Burwell said she has been denied access to the center since Sept. 15, and can't provide any medical services for the birds and other animals.

Goshen said in Monday's phone interview that she could not comment on whether Burwell was banned from the facility. She said the animals continue to receive medical treatment.

"We have always had other vets on call," she said, and the board was aware that, once the new building is ready to occupy, another vet would be needed. "We have a good staff."

Burwell said in her online post that the board of directors is planning a meeting on Thursday to officially remove her as a member of the board of directors, but that she has no intention of resigning. She said she has already been told she is no longer a member of the construction committee for the new building.

Goshen said she was unaware of any board meeting on Thursday.

In her post, Burwell said she wanted to resolve any issues the board has with her involvement with the center, so she can continue to serve.

Burwell could not be reached by phone for comment Monday.

Goshen said Monday that the board is "trying to work things out" with Burwell.

"I can't talk about details."

Supporters of the center have been weighing in.

Clara and Gerald Wakefield have publicly come to Burwell's defense with a letter to the editor in this edition of The Star. (See Page A4.)

The Wakefields, who describe themselves as monthly donors to the Wildlife Center, praised Burwell's skill in wildlife rehabilitation, noting in the letter that she can "mend a hummingbird's broken wing and return it to flight in the wild."

Describing themselves as "heartbroken and angry," the Wakefields are calling on the center's board of directors, executive director and Burwell to have an "open, public meeting" to let donors and supporters know "what is really happening."

Many other posts are asking for the same thing.

A petition has also been started on the center's Facebook page to restore Burwell to her post. Chris Weber said on the page that he has 500 signatures on it.

Goshen said Monday that things are rarely what they appear to be and that she hopes the public will calm down and wait for additional facts to come out.

The board's posting on its Facebook page insists that all changes have been due to "restructuring the organization in preparation for future growth."

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