

OPEN FORUM: VULTURES CIRCLING

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Are you aware of the recent events at the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center and the unbelievable treatment of the founder?

History — The Blue Ridge Wildlife Center (BRWC) was founded in 2000 by Dr. Belinda Burwell. It has seen tremendous growth over the past 15 years under her dedication, management, and veterinary care.

Thousands of injured wild animals and birds have been cared for and rehabilitated. Qualified and caring assistants have been hired to assist. New technology and innovative techniques involving both diagnostic procedures and therapeutic treatments have been pioneered by Dr. Burwell and shared in the wildlife veterinarian community.

As a result of her hard work, dedication, and devotion, private donations have increased dramatically; a new facility is currently being built without use of any grants, federal funds, or state funds.

Current Situation — Because of the increasing responsibilities resulting from the fantastic growth at the facility, Dr. Burwell recognized that she needed to divorce herself from some of the administrative activity, but wanted to stay deeply involved in the veterinary care of the injured wildlife.

The other board members, with little involvement from her, interviewed and chose someone to fill that role. In May 2015, the Board of Directors hired a new executive director. Over the past several months since he was hired, it seems he has been quietly and slowly pushing Dr. Burwell completely out of the organization.

Publicly, there has been the appearance of a smooth transition going on at the center, but privately we have found a different story.

After Dr. Burwell turned over all her administrative duties to him, the new executive director began an effort to force her out of the organization completely. He stopped giving her mail to her. (We found this out when we discovered she was not receiving the letters we were sending her with our monthly donations.) He also took away the personal e-mail address she had for 11 years, limiting her ability to communicate. She had to resign as director of Wildlife Services but continued on as the center's vet.

Although still acting as the center's vet, she was excluded from staff meetings, and the number of hours she was allowed to spend on care of the injured animals was limited. These actions limited her effectiveness with both staff and donors/supporters. Now, as we understand it, she has been removed as veterinarian with no explanation and, to our knowledge, no replacement has been

found. She has asked to meet with the entire Board of Directors to find out what is going on, but they will not agree to meet with her.

Incredibly, on Sept. 20, the Board of Directors gave notice of a special meeting, scheduled for Oct. 1, to remove Dr. Burwell from her position as a member of the Board of Directors of the organization she founded, and essentially remove her completely from the organization. No reason was given.

We have been involved with wildlife rescue for almost 30 years, and with Dr. Burwell and the BRWC since its inception. She is an exceptionally gifted wildlife veterinarian. We have never heard of another who could mend a hummingbird's broken wing and return it to flight in the wild.

We have worked with other wildlife vets both here and in the Midwest. You will not find a replacement with her talent and skill who is willing to put 100 percent into saving injured wildlife. We have many memories of her successful treatment of injured wildlife we brought to the center, and have been monthly donors since 2007.

What can be done? — We are heartbroken and angry about how the founder of the BRWC has been and is being treated. If you care about wildlife rehabilitation and feel Dr. Burwell is vital to this organization, please join us in demanding an open, public meeting among the entire Board of Directors, the executive director, and Dr. Burwell to “air” to the donors and supporters what is really happening at the BRWC. Can anyone continue to support the BRWC without such a meeting? Express your concern by contacting the Board of Directors at info@blueridgewildlife.org, or P.O. Box 326, Millwood, 22646. If enough donors and supporters of the BRWC and of Dr. Burwell question what is happening, perhaps we can turn it around before these actions destroy what she has founded, built, and dreamed for the future of Virginia wildlife rehabilitation.

Clara and Gerald Wakefield are residents of Stephens City.