

# **Festival fallout: Discrepancies emerge following large benefit at Hillbillie Ranch**

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JERSEYVILLE - Brandon Sinclair of Hillbille Ranch and Janice Arnold of Angel Ministries - both of Jerseyville - agreed on several points Wednesday afternoon when asked why money generated during Hillbillie Ranch's "Mud Spree for Angel Tree" was not donated to the ministry program.

The event, which was held at Hillbillie Ranch, located at 20491 Otterville Road just outside Jerseyville, began Friday, Nov. 10, 2017, and lasted through Sunday, Nov. 12.

The event featured nationally-known country music stars, celebrated off-road vehicles, more than a dozen vendors, camping and alcohol over the course of the three-day weekend. Tickets for the event ranged from \$20 - \$350, depending on the event package chosen. Following the event, however, no funds were given from Hillbillie Ranch to Angel Ministries (formerly known as Angel Tree Ministries).

Sinclair said the issue stemmed from the fact Arnold's organization did not have a valid 501(c)3 tax-exempt status, a claim Arnold said was true. Sinclair said Arnold promised him she had all the proper documentation as many as 100 days prior to the event while in his Jerseyville office. Arnold said a 501(c)3 status was not questioned until Sinclair was attempting to gain a grant and volunteers for the event from Wal-Mart. Sinclair agreed with Arnold's assessment.

"I said we needed documentation," Sinclair said. "She finally came clean she has never registered with the government, so we gave her 30 days to comply, and she did not."

Arnold said Angel Ministries, which she has managed for 19 years, has never needed a tax-exempt status due to the fact the ministry mainly works to distribute donated goods to families in need, and therefore never really received monetary donations of any significant magnitude.

Sinclair said Arnold's management of a charity for nearly two decades without a proper 501(c)3 status was irresponsible. He said his ignorance of their status was due to him trusting a beloved Jerseyville charity, which has been around and well-established for such a long time.

"She's been around so long, that I assumed she ," Sinclair said. "She swore up and down she had it, and I thought, 'surely, she has her stuff together, and has all her business stuff legal - but she don't.'"

When Sinclair delivered Arnold paperwork for the Wal-Mart grant, which he said would have "nearly limitless funding potential," he said she never filled it out, and did not return it. Sinclair even admitted to "harassing" Arnold at Angel Ministries - saying he called her, texted her and stopped into her office looking for answers, before she admitted she did not have that tax-exempt status.

"We thought they had cut ties with us, and then, when we had the event, one of my crew said, 'Angel Tree is here,' and I wondered what was going on," he said.

Why Sinclair continued to promote the country music mud festival with the name of a charity with which he claimed to have cut ties was due to the amount of promotion with Angel Tree's name on it, he said. Sinclair said flyers and the website each had promoted Angel Tree for so long, he did not want to change it.

Arnold, however, believes the name Angel Tree was left on the name of the event to generate more revenue and excitement to the new Hillbillie Ranch establishment. She said Sinclair never specifically asked about her ministry's 501(c)3 status, but would have been honest if he had. She told Riverbender.com immediately upon the interview's beginning she was in the process of attaining the status, but it would have been impossible to comply with Sinclair's 30-day ultimatum.

"He asked about it after the fact," she said. "We are in the process of getting it. It takes six to eight months, and costs about \$1,000 to get it. I felt like this was all beginning to settle down, and I really wish it could all just go away. I wish I had never said O.K. when he asked me about it back in August."

That sentiment is also shared by Sinclair, who said future events will include more research and even background checks as well as contracts. It should be noted neither Angel Ministries nor Hillbillie Ranch entered into an actual contract regarding the mud spree.



So where did the money go?

Sinclair said the event actually cost the ranch money. He blamed poor weather conditions as well as a lack of support from Angel Tree. The weather was cold - which was not conducive to an outdoor camping event with multiple ATVs. He said the lack of proper documentation from Angel Tree cost more money in both insurance and liquor licensing.

That insurance proved to be invaluable, as two separate accidents at the event led to participants being airlifted to local hospitals.

Instead of donating the proceeds, Sinclair said his friend, Owen Clemons, who Arnold knew only by the pseudonym "Legend," created a GoFundMe to raise money for the charity. Arnold said Legend was promising to match money raised with his own money. Sinclair did not make such a statement.

As much as \$4,000 was donated to that GoFundMe, and that money was used to purchase toys from Wal-Mart to donate to a Toys for Tots program in Schuyler County, Illinois, which is north of Pike County, Illinois. Sinclair said Clemons hailed from that area, and said he offered a refund to anyone unhappy with the change of charity - citing Angel Tree's lack of a 501(c)3 as a reason. He assured no one accepted that offer.

Arnold did say her organization did collect from the event, however. Riders coming to it hosted their own personal toy drive, which garnered two 55-gallon buckets worth of toys for donation as well as bikes. She also said Angel Ministries collected \$1,140 from a 50/50 drawing (Sinclair said she received two trailers worth of toys, a handful of bikes and \$1,500 from the 50/50).

"We were about to draw from the 50/50 when he came around and asked me for the money we collected," she said. "I told him we had it and we did a live drawing on the stage Sunday afternoon."

Surdyke Harley Davidson also sent Arnold a check for \$150 following the event.

Donations to Angel Ministries go toward providing Christmas gifts to families in need throughout Jersey County, Arnold said. She said children through high school (as long as they are attending classes) first receive hats, coats, gloves, shirts, pants and even underwear before being given toys and games for Christmas. Arnold said families across the county adopt people to support, and many organizations offer shoes, coats and various other items in bulk.

Arnold said Angel Ministries has also opened a new location on State Street in which people making new starts through changes in employment and relationships can get what they need to refresh their living situations.

She said her organization with assistance from Tri-County Transit assisted a woman who was drugged and beaten escape her abusive relationship. Finding herself living in a boarding home, Arnold said the woman was soon able to collect enough funds to have her own apartment, which was not well-furnished.

"We helped her get a kitchen island, and a microwave," Arnold said. "We're trying to help her get more kitchen appliances, bedding and things like lamps. Our ministry on State Street is like a resale shop, only we don't sell anything. People can come in and take what they need. We have everything from nail clippers to refrigerators."

Extensive paperwork, similar to that required to collect public aid, is required by Angel Ministries in order for someone to take advantage of their services.

Still, Sinclair believes Angel Ministries to be illegitimate, due to lack of a 501(c)3. He said he contacted Jersey County States Attorney Benjamin Goetten regarding the status of Arnold's ministries.

In response, Goetten issued this statement:

*We have not received a complaint nor is there an active investigation regarding Angel Tree Ministries and the Hillbillie Ranch. If there was a complaint alleging operation of a charitable institution without being a registered nonprofit under 501c3, that investigation would typically go through the Illinois Attorney Generals Office. If my office received such a complaint, that complaint would be forwarded to the AG for further investigation.*



