

PENNSYLVANIA

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Dueling charities provide for families of police officers, firefighters killed in line of duty

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THE LAWSUIT reads like a battle between business behemoths, with claims of unfair competition and trademark dilution. But this war was over cash collected for the most heartbreaking reason: To send the kids of Philadelphia police officers and firefighters killed in the line of duty to college.

For years, the Hero Scholarship Fund of Philadelphia did the job, raising millions donated by citizens and corporations to pay for hundreds of scholarships. But in 2006, unhappy with that fund's management, a group of city and civic leaders started a new nonprofit, the Hero Thrill Show Inc., to meet the same need. That led to the lawsuit.

"That's history," said Jack Yeakel, the original fund's executive director, of the suit, which was settled in October after the Thrill Show agreed to prominently display in its advertising that it was not affiliated with Yeakel's group.

But with two city cops killed this month, charitable donations to causes benefiting police and firefighters are expected to rise, and a little history is needed to illuminate what many folks don't know: Both funds still exist.

"It does get confusing," Yeakel said. "Ask the public, or ask the average cop on the street [who sells tickets for the annual thrill show], and they don't know there are two funds."

That confusion can lead to do-gooders' donating to or soliciting money for the wrong fund. And the competition between the charities is notable because their haul is far from chump change: The funds are worth millions of dollars.

Rewind a half-century.

In October 1954, a 4,000-gallon tank full of floor-cleaning solvent exploded in the Charles W. Berg Laboratories, in Kensington. Eleven firefighters died in the heat and fumes of the flameless blast, caused by faulty ventilation. Citizens mobilized to raise money to send the sons and daughters of the grieving families to college, staging an annual Hero Thrill Show in which motorcycle officers



Jimmy Binns, chairperson of "Cop Wheels" rides in the parade of motorcycles and Thrill Show from Atlantic City to Margate, NJ on Saturday morning, August 28, 2010. (Laurence Kesterson / Staff Photographer) JTHRILL29, 8/28/10, Atlantic City, NJ. Second annual Cop Wheels Thrill Show police motorcycle parade and run from Atlantic City, NJ to Margate, NJ. The event had about 350 civilian and police riders representing 15 different police departments and clubs from the South Jersey and Philadelphia areas to raise money for "Cop Wheels" a program to support local law enforcement.

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showed off their riding skills to paying spectators.

By 2005, the show's audience had dwindled so low that the Hero Scholarship Fund of Philadelphia decided to end it and solicit donations in other ways. By 2007, several widows and children of slain officers complained that fund managers had delayed, reduced or denied them tuition payments. Further, they charged, the fund's director, attorney Jeremiah Callaghan, was so rude, he hung up on anyone who dared question him. As accusations of money mismanagement and even theft flew, City Council held a public hearing, and Jimmy Binns got involved.

Binns is a lawyer so passionate about the police that he frequently donates money for police needs and occasionally hops on his Harley wearing his own faux police uniform to ride alongside real motorcycle cops.

Binns created the Hero Thrill Show Inc. and put on its first show in 2007. He tried to persuade the original fund to merge with his effort. But the fund's board didn't just balk at the offer — it sued, claiming unfair competition and trademark dilution in a 2008 complaint that led to the settlement in October. The allegations of mismanagement and theft were never proved, and the original fund's top leaders, Callaghan and board president Ruth Sliwinski, have since died.

Today, the funds share a common mission.

Binns' group, using proceeds from the thrill shows, pays tuition for 17 children of police officers and firefighters killed in the line of duty. Officer Brian Lorenzo, who died on his way home from work July 8, when an allegedly drunk driver went the wrong way down Interstate 95 and smashed into his police motorcycle, performed annually in the thrill shows.

Yeakel's group, funded by donations, foots the bill for 22 scholarships for the children of cops and firefighters killed or permanently disabled in the line of duty.

Neither man would provide their funds' financial records to the Daily News, but tax records show that the Hero Scholarship Fund was worth \$2.6 million and the Thrill Show \$1.4 million in 2010, the most recent year for which such data were available.

Nils Frederiksen, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office, which investigates complaints against charities, said that it's not unusual for multiple charities to serve the same need but advised donors to research groups to ensure that the donations go where they're most needed and most efficiently used.

"You have not only the power but also the duty to do your homework on the charitable group you want to give money to, so that money fulfills the services you want it to fulfill," Frederiksen said. "Some groups spend a lot of money on overhead and fundraising; others spent it on direct services. If they're hesitant to give up information on what they do and how they use your money, that in itself should be a red flag."

Rob Skerski, 20, whose father, Gary, was killed May 8, 2006, by an armed robber in Frankford, is studying criminal justice and business at La Salle University, thanks to the Hero Thrill Show Inc.

"This is one of the biggest things my dad was worried about, us being able to afford to go to college," said Skerski.

He hopes to go into federal law enforcement. Meanwhile, his younger sister will be a high-school junior this fall and also will rely on the Hero Thrill Show Inc. to pay for college.

"It would have been a lot harder on my family without this help," Skerski said.

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