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Little People group assails wrestling event in Chandler

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CRONKITE NEWS

Leaders of the Phoenix area chapter of the Little People of America are upset that organizers of a Chandler festival hired and promoted an “extreme midget wrestling” event, saying the term is derogatory, painful and may violate federal laws protecting people with disabilities.

Ed Myers, a former disability-issues attorney who is president of the Little People of America’s Valley of the Sun Chapter, launched an online petition to remove the wrestling from the Rockin’ Taco Street Fest on Saturday, Sept. 16.

“Initially, we were hoping to have it canceled, but short of that, we want the name eliminated from all advertising and media,” Myers said. “We find that the ‘m word’ is a very derogatory word for people with disabilities. It equates to hate speech.”

Echo of Redskins debate

The Downtown Chandler Community Partnership, which organized the Sept. 16 festival, removed the name from its website and advertising materials, but the wrestling organizer was unrepentant.

“The Washington Redskins didn’t change their name and they’re not going to,” managing partner Skyler Ward said, referring to the ongoing naming controversy over the NFL team. “We’re not going to change our name.”

The festival is in a city park, Dr. A.J. Chandler Park, but Chandler officials said it is not involved in the festival and can’t stop any of its activities unless they pose a threat to the health and safety of those attending the event.

“The city of Chandler is strongly committed to supporting and fostering a diverse and inclusive community,” spokeswoman Stephanie Romero said in an email. “The city understands that certain terms may be offensive and we are not insensitive to these concerns. The city of Chandler is not the sponsor, organizer or promoter of the event, even though it is being held in a public venue.”

The Downtown Chandler Community Partnership, which promotes events and businesses, is separate from the city, but two Chandler council members, Sam Huang and Terry Roe, sit on the downtown partnership board as ex-officio members, according to the group website.

The festival’s marketing and advertising group, HDE Agency, declined an interview but said they understand concerns.

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Chandler ADA coordinator.

“What is particularly troubling is that this word is being associated with the city of Chandler’s name,” Myers wrote, saying the term is “denigrating, dehumanizing and humiliating.”

Term traced to freak shows

Achondroplasia, the most common form of dwarfism, affects about one of every 26,000 to 40,000 births in America, according to the Little People website.

Stephen Chrisomalis is a linguistics professor at Wayne State University who edits “The Lexiculture Papers,” which provides student-produced research on modern words and their historical context.

“The root of the word is ‘midge,’ a variety of small, marsh-dwelling fly with a short lifespan,” according to research by student John Anderson.

“Naturally, this word is seen as unpleasant by many. During the late 1800s, the era of sideshows and circuses, to call a little



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Gail Blackburn, right, of Little People of America with her daughter, Britney.

“We do not want to offend anyone in our community. We truly understand that certain terms may be offensive and we are not insensitive to these concerns,” an HDE spokesperson said in a statement. “The wrestling production is contracted through a company based in Texas called Extreme Midget Wrestling. Any concerns regarding the name of the wrestling company should be addressed with the business owner.”

Ward, a managing partner for the wrestling company, defended his company’s use of the term.

“We’re just out here working,” Ward said. “When I first started this company, I came up with five names and every one of the guys who worked for me said they wanted ‘Extreme Midget Wrestling.’ We can’t make everyone happy, but we’re not here to exploit anybody.”

‘M-word’ called hateful

The national Little People’s organization is trying to abolish the term and replace it with preferred terms such as “dwarf,” “little person” or “person of short stature.”

District Director Gail Blackburn, an average-height mother to daughter Britney Blackburn, a little person, spoke out about the effects the word has played on her family.

“That word — ‘midget’ — spurs such hatred, just like the n-word does to a certain group and the r-word does to another group. It spurs so much hate,” Blackburn said. “None of our people are safe at this event. That’s what is upsetting to me more than the wrestler. It’s the way that Chandler has handled this.”

The event falls under the scrutiny of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which oversees discrimination by public entities, Myers said in an email to Warren White,

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person a midget was to imply that they were well-formed. It was almost an affectionate term at the time,” the website says.

But the term fell out of favor years ago.

“The term dates back to 1865, the height of the freak show era, and was generally applied only to short-statured persons who were displayed for public amusement, which is why it is considered so unacceptable today,” the Little People of America site says.

Group wants an apology

The little people community is split on whether such wrestling events are exploitative, but Myers said the chapter strongly opposes the language associated with the entertainment company.

Myers and the local Little People of America chapter want to raise awareness about the harmful nomenclature attached to the event and hope for an apology from Chandler officials, saying it has inflicted pain on the community.

“Really, it is about the word and trying to not create a hostile environment with that kind of a word,” Myers said. “I did not see an apology in their letter. That’s a pretty simple thing to do, and that would solve a lot of problems.”