

From: patrice jones <patrice@bravebirds.org>
Subject: from the co-founder of VINE Sanctuary
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To: FonteynP@greenmtn.edu
Cc: throopw@greenmtn.edu



Paul J. Fonteyn, President
Green Mountain College
Poultney, VT 05764

Dear President Fonteyn,

In addition to being the co-founder of VINE Sanctuary, I am a scholar, an author, and an educator. I have taught at the University of Michigan, the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Metropolitan State University, and Minneapolis Community & Technical College. I am an associate at the New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies and an advisory faculty member at the Kerulos Center. I serve on the editorial boards of the *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* and the *Peace Studies Journal*. My own publications include one book and multiple scholarly anthology chapters as well as peer-reviewed journal articles.

University of Maryland Eastern Shore is a land grant college with an agricultural program. So, I do have some sense of where Green Mountain College might be coming from in its thinking on the oxen known as Lou and Bill. At the same time, I feel—strongly—that defensive digging-in-on-a-decision has prevented college administrators from adequately grappling with several key questions.

Here they are:

(1) **What about the scholarly principle of reconsidering in light of new data?** As I understand it, the decision to kill Bill and Lou was made in August and most of the discussions verifying that decision occurred before VINE learned of the controversy and made the offer of sanctuary. Prior to VINE's offer, the decision was between (a) killing them, (b) paying for their care, or (c) selling them off to an uncertain fate. But now there is a new option, and I do not believe you can sincerely say that option has been fully and fairly considered.

(2) **What about the confirmation bias?** Once a decision has been made, people tend to cognitively favor information that confirms that decision and to disfavor information that disconfirms it. This is not necessarily conscious. Experiment after experiment has demonstrated that people tend to forget, not notice, or discount information that contradicts a currently held belief or suggests that a previous decision was wrong. What steps have been taken—in considering VINE's offer of sanctuary—to override those natural cognitive biases?

(3) **Should public opinion be ignored?** Another piece of new information is that this decision has shocked the conscience of people around the state and around the world. Going by the public statements of the college, it appears that information has been greeted with the same disdain with which international outcries about human rights are sometimes greeted. But don't we want countries—and communities—to listen seriously, and sincerely reconsider their position, when "outsiders" tell them that something they are doing is cruel or unfair?

(4) **Have students been well served by this process?** I have several concerns here. First, since there is a well-established gender difference in opinions about animal rights and animal welfare, I worry that the women on campus have been overridden or made to feel silly or sentimental if they opposed the slaughter. Apart from that question, I am very concerned about the well-being of students who feel close to these animals and oppose their slaughter. Whatever they themselves choose to eat, how will they feel knowing that Lou and Bill are on the menu for others? But, I am possibly even more concerned for those students who have voted to kill Lou and Bill. My guess is that many will later regret and feel deep remorse about this decision. I do not feel that college students should be put in the awful position of deciding whether sentient beings should live or die. If this were an experiment on the students, it would be considered unethical due to the stress involved in making such a decision. This should have been a thought experiment, not a decision upon which the real lives of innocent being depended. That can still be the case, if the administration steps in to stay the order of execution.

(5) **What about callousness?** Lou and Bill were forced to work whether they liked it or not. To make them work, the farm manager and the students he directed yoked them and even—it appears, given the picture of the faculty member with the raised whip over the animals' backs—beat them. To do this, they had to numb their feelings of sympathy. They had to specifically ignore Lou and Bill's wishes and interests. How, then, could they possibly suddenly be capable of adequately considering Lou and Bill's wishes and interests when deciding their fate? It is not an accident, I think, that the farm manager came up with the slaughter-for-hamburger idea. Were it not for his idea, no student would have suggested slaughtering the animals who had become the school's mascot—especially not with the offer of a free home for the rest of their natural lives on the table.

(6) **What about authority?** Green Mountain College prides itself on respecting student self-determination. But I wonder if the persuasive power of authority has been fully accounted for in this case. The farm manager is a trusted authority figure to whom many students undoubtedly feel loyal. We saw, with the infamous Milgram shock experiment, that many people readily behave hurtfully if an authority tells them this is the right thing to do. The farm manager, for reasons of his own, has been adamant that these oxen must be killed. Can the college be certain that his strong feelings about this have not influenced the many students who look up to him?

(7) **What's wrong with mercy?** Even if the decision to kill Bill and Lou was made without any of the problems I have described, what

would be the harm of staying the execution and showing mercy? Convicted killers at least have the opportunity to argue for clemency. But, it seems, Green Mountain College has refused to seriously consider VINE's offer of sanctuary, insisting that Bill and Lou must be killed because the decision had already been made.

(8) Are Lou and Bill objects? I understand that the college wants this decision—including any subsequent feelings—to be an object lesson for the students. But haven't Lou and Bill served as objects for long enough? They are sentient beings. Oxen share the same basic brain architecture responsible for emotion in people. To kill them just to make a point, when you could so easily grant them ease and freedom, seems to me—and to so many others who have written to the college—to cross the line into what even many animal farmers and meat eaters would consider "inhumane."

(9) Is this good for the college? The decision to kill Lou and Bill has assaulted the ethical sensibilities of people worldwide—including prominent scholars like Marc Bekoff, who has written that he "will do all I can to publicize the heartless and unnecessary slaughter of these amazing animals far and wide" if the college persists in carrying out the death sentence. While the campaign to save these oxen was begun by local animal welfare advocates, national organizations have taken note. I see from the most recent issue of the newsletter of the Institute of Animals & Society that the college is seeking to promote its new animal studies program. Is the slaughter of Bill and Lou the way to kick off that effort? Or, would the news—now sure to be spread worldwide—that the college has elected to spare their lives make more of a positive impact?

All of the foregoing represents my personal assessment of the situation as a psychologist and educator. Let me now speak for VINE:

We reiterate our offer of a retirement home for these two college workers. Our ability to care for them is uncontested and can easily be verified by Farm Sanctuary (the oldest and most reputable farmed animal sanctuary in the country) and our veterinarian.

We understand that the college may feel we have misrepresented its position. We are not responsible for the text of the online petition created by another local animal advocacy organization. Our own action alert was informed by a conversation between VINE Cofounder Miriam Jones and Kenneth Mulder and does not misrepresent what he said. It was he who foregrounded the economic issue, secondarily raising the issue of wasting resources on no-longer-productive animals.

We are ready and eager to work with Green Mountain College to bring this to a conclusion that spares the lives of Lou and Bill while also rewarding the college for its humane decision. Looking past that happy outcome, we would be delighted to be part of any on-campus debates or fora on relevant ethical or environmental questions.

We ask you, as President, to step in to offer clemency to Bill and Lou. In the alternative, we ask that you delay their slaughter until after the next meeting of the Board of Trustees and place the question on the agenda for that meeting.

Sincerely,
patrice jones
Co-founder, VINE Sanctuary

cc. Board of Trustees
Bill Throop, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs