

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

& THE TRUE STORY OF Gus THE GOAT



by Larry Piergallini

When my oldest son, Jason, was about four years old (he's now 33), my wife's aunt and uncle decided that he needed the experience of raising a baby orphaned goat—a kid for a kid, so to speak. Jason named his new companion "Gus the Goat." Jason was responsible for bottle feeding Gus several times a day until the goat could eat and thrive on grain and hay. Gus' home became an unused box stall, but during summer daylight hours, he was permitted to romp outdoors in the barnyard until he set his eyes and appetite on the landscaping and flowers around the house.

To remedy the situation, a new red collar and a 25-foot dog chain kept Gus out of the flowers, yet allowed him to enjoy the outdoors and the limited vegetation. Another plus was that the fence rows were kept clean by Gus—a win-win situation, so I thought. For several years, Gus spent his winter days in the warmth of the horse barn and in the warmer months, he was tethered to the wooden board fence and did a very good job of eating weeds and grass.

Some of our neighbors in town took a liking to Gus and looked forward to seeing him every summer. One family somehow figured out that Gus liked hard candy. They told me he preferred the apple-flavored ones. So, it became fairly common to see people stop their cars and let their children feed Gus candy and give him a good scratch on the head.

But as you can imagine, someone came to the conclusion that Gus deserved better, even though we thought that Gus had it made. In the winter, a warm barn, grain and second cutting hay; in the summer, all the fresh air, weeds and hand-delivered apple-flavored candy a goat could want. Seemed like a real good life for a castrated goat. Gus seemed happy too.

Nevertheless, one day in July, I was baling hay on a ridgetop a few hundred yards away from Gus. Although it was nearly 90 degrees that day, Gus seemed

to be enjoying the warm weather and was engaged in his summer task of eating weeds and keeping the fence row clean. From the tractor seat, I could see a car stop and someone got out of the car and approached Gus. Initially, I just assumed that it was one of the neighbors giving Gus his favorite candy treat, but when the car left, it went to my parent's house, which was the nearest house to Gus' location. That someone appeared to knock at the door. No one was home. The person and the car left. This seemed a little unusual, so I decided to check on Gus to see if something was wrong. It turned out that Gus was fine. His water bucket was nearly full, his belly was full and he was content. On the way back to the hayfield, I decided to stop at my parent's house to see if anything was left there by the visitor. There was. It was a note from the County Humane Office indicating that the owner of the tethered goat needed to call their office.

I made the call the next morning from my law office. If the County Humane Office had caller ID, I wanted them to see the call was made from a law office. That should be enough to scare them away. Silly me.

An individual answered the phone and I inquired about the note and the issue with Gus. The humane officer indicated she had gotten a call from a concerned citizen about a goat who gets tied to a fence at the Piergallini farm every summer. The humane officer further stated that on the date she decided to pay Gus a visit, that it was 90 degrees and that Gus had no shade.

I asked the humane officer if she noticed that Gus had water in a bucket. She agreed he did. I asked if she thought that Gus looked distressed. She stated she didn't know since she didn't know what a distressed goat looked like. I even offered to have Gus examined by a veterinarian of her choice to determine if Gus was suffering from any type of mistreatment. That offer was declined. The humane officer simply repeated that she wanted Gus

to have shade.

I pointed out to the humane officer that I was making hay on that same day, in the sun. The officer's reply was that was my choice, but that Gus had no choice since he was chained to a fence. I relented and informed the officer that Gus would have shade. So, the next day, I tied Gus to an old hay wagon we weren't using, so that if it were too hot, he could retreat beneath the wagon and out of the sun. After all, even I occasionally enjoyed a cool drink in the shade of a hay wagon on a hot day. If it was good enough for me, it ought to be good enough for a goat. Silly me.

A few days later, the humane officer called my office and stated that Gus needed tree shade not wagon shade. Perplexed, I asked why. The officer relayed that she checked on Gus and that he was sitting on top of the hay wagon, in the sun, instead of under it and she deduced that Gus did not like wagon shade, but would prefer tree shade. At that point, I verbally confronted the offi-

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Gus The Goat continued
cer with her obvious low animal I.Q. and laced my description of her with several four-letter words. Stupid me.

The next day I received a call from the county prosecutor who advised me that a particular humane officer was at his office complaining about a goat that sits in the sun and that I was the criminal that let that happen. Further, it was the humane officer's opinion that I was guilty of animal abuse because I used foul language in our discussion. After all, anyone that would use that type of language would also be cruel enough to mistreat a goat. I tried to explain to the prosecutor that Gus was healthy, well-nourished, had plenty of water, was provided shade, but chose the sun, just like some people I saw at the beach several years ago.

The prosecutor indicated that he was not disputing anything I said, but his assessment was that the humane officer was not going to go away until charges were filed and that she also would likely publicize Gus' predicament. I asked the prosecutor to give me 48 hours to dwell on the issue and I would get back to him with a solution.

At the time of this whole Gus episode, my family owned and operated three small town grocery stores. We thought we served the community well and they were fairly profitable. I had a good law practice in a rural area and I thought the community had a good opinion of me. Coincidentally, sometime during my 48 hours of consideration, the humane officer, who shopped at one of the grocery stores, advised my mother that Gus and I had become a problem.

Although I had already come to the conclusion that if criminal charges were filed and the local newspaper and television station publicized a goat chained to a hay wagon in the sun, that public perception would likely be different than mine and Gus' perception of the issue. My mother also reinforced that thought with me in very direct terms. Our reputation as honest, hard-working business people whose spare time is centered around the family farm and care of farm animals should not be jeopardized by a sun-loving, healthy, weed-eating goat chained to a hay wagon.

A good reputation is essential for any enterprise to succeed. After all, major corporations spend millions of dollars in advertising in an attempt to convince the public of their good reputation and work ethic.

A good reputation is fragile. One mistake could easily damage what took years to develop. The public perception of Gus' treatment could be our nemesis. Gus would no longer be tied to a hay wagon and eat weeds, in the sun. Public perception and its effect on one's reputation was simply too much to risk.