

Cirque du So-long

By Todd R. Brown
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NEWARK — Circus Chimera came to NewPark Mall for the past four years and to Union City before that, but the acrobatic show won't go on this summer in the Tri-City area, or anyplace else.

The company said it canceled its 2008 season because it couldn't hire enough temporary Mexican workmen thanks to a visa exemption change in September.

The Tri-Cities League of Volunteers got about \$12,000 from the show last summer, but Executive Director Shirley Sisk said the Newark nonprofit will have to make do without the income this year because a replacement could not be found.

"It's been a big hit for us," she said. "They were having problems with the federal government."

Specifically, the circus became a victim of politics when an H2B visa exemption for returning workers was not renewed because it was attached to the failed Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act.

Many businesses have complained since that they can't find enough non-immigrants to make up the difference as landscapers, fruit pickers and other seasonal pastimes under the current annual 66,000 visa cap.

"It's getting more and more difficult to imagine putting an organization back together and starting up again," said James Judkins, owner of Chimera, which hit the road a decade ago. "I've got the equipment just sitting here. You need the people."

Although he said he doesn't want to sound holier-than-thou, he noted that he can't employ illegal immigrants in the circus because of the scrutiny a traveling operation gets, and because he doesn't want to risk his workers' safety or job records.

And while his international performers get other kinds of visas, he said there aren't enough H2Bs to go around to hire enough people to set up, tear down and move the circus for part of the year.

"Most U.S. workers don't want to do that," he said. "They want to work year-round."

Besides the circus, he pointed to California ski resorts, Chesapeake Bay crabbers and Upper Peninsula Michigan resorts as examples of seasonal businesses that depend on immigrant labor.

With Circus Chimera, based near Brownsville, Texas, he said temporary workers could earn a net \$300 per week to start, and up to \$750 as returning veterans, and they got meals and living quarters at no charge.

The circus also raised money for charities at all of its stops, Judkins said, bringing in about \$3,000 to \$4,000 a day for local nonprofits about 300 days per year.

Chimera visited several Bay Area cities during the season, including Daly City, Half Moon Bay, Hayward and Scotts Valley.

Mike Gorman worked for the circus' El Cerrito booking and publicity office, which closed because of Chimera's hiatus. He now works for Butler Amusements in Fairfield, which provides carnival entertainment.

He said economic pressures don't make things any easier for such businesses.

"Things are tough," he said. "Just the price of gas alone, can you imagine if you have 40, 50 semis going down the road at \$5 a gallon?"

Judkins said he has been to Congress five times to lobby for a reinstatement of the visa exemption. In 2007, the National Restaurant Association estimated that 50,000 returning workers took advantage of the opportunity the previous year.

"Just about every congressman or senator we talk to says it's a good program. It's one of the programs that works," Judkins said. "It just got caught in the crosshairs of comprehensive immigration reform."

Reach Todd R. Brown at 510-353-7004 or todd.brown@bayareanewsgroup.com. Visit our blog at www.ibabuzz.com/tricitybeat.