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DONATING VEHICLES

DRIVEN TO DONATE

Vehicles given to charity, but concerns remain

By **Michael C. Upton**
Reading Eagle correspondent

While the act of donating a vehicle to charity is often used to reduce an income tax burden, people such as Greg Auchter of Mount Penn pursued the endeavor just to give to a worthwhile cause.

Auchter is one of the thousands of individuals who donated a vehicle to charity in 2019, hoping to make a difference.

But while catchy jingles and snappy slogans on commercials encourage owners to donate their vehicles to charity, not all is as it may seem. Words of caution about donating a vehicle come from a range of voices, from state and federal agencies and people such as Auchter.

"In hindsight, I probably should have researched it a little more," said Auchter. "Here's where I put my word of caution out to people who are thinking of donating a car: There are a lot of (organizations) out there, and some of these places are only donating a certain portion to a charity."

Trying to help

In October 2019, Auchter donated his 2001 Nissan pickup truck to Cars Helping Veterans, an outfit he said he found online collecting car donations for Purple Heart-awarded, homeless and disabled veterans.

Cars Helping Veterans is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization providing support to groups such as the Military Order of the Purple Heart, Soldiers' Angels and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Many of the multitude of organizations accepting vehicles for charity are third-party groups. A study by the Government Ac-

countability Office states that, on average, only 35% of a vehicle's value makes it to the intended charity. Most of the remaining funds are used by third-party organizations for management and advertising.

According to a Guidestar.org report from 2015, 15% of the value collected from a donated car through Cars Helping Veterans goes to the charitable program. The same report shows outfits such as CarDonations.com at 3% and Cars4DisabledVets.org at 8% are well below the government average.

"It (Cars Helping Veterans) is a little below average on the amount of money they return to the group," Auchter said, who added he would donate a vehicle again.

But, next time he will do more research into the nonprofit accepting his donation.

One of the best

One of the oldest car donation organizations also ranks as one of the best. The charity watchdog group Charity Navigator named 800charitycars.org as a Four-Star Charity and Guidestar.org reports the Florida-based nonprofit gives 84% of the vehicle value it collects to charitable programs.

Brian Menzies, CEO and founder, started 800charitycars.org in 1996 to do "something worthwhile" in a "pre-internet" world, he said; thus, the reference in its name to "800," which signifies a toll-free phone number.

"There was nobody involved, and then everybody got involved in car-donation programs," said Menzies.

His 800charitycars.org is one of more than 4,300 charities with revenues of more than \$100,000 to have car-donation programs.



Dan Lubas, left, of the Shillington Lions Club and Eric Moyer of Moyer Nissan in South Heidelberg Township promote vehicle donations.

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"It's a nightmare out there," Menzies said. "It's like the wild, wild west. There are some (good) local programs out there, but we do this nationally."

When a call comes in from an owner looking to donate a quality vehicle, Menzies' group connects with a local organization to facilitate the auto exchange to a family or individual in need. In Pennsylvania, the donated vehicles collected by 800charitycars.org are delivered through Family Promise, a New Jersey-based charity helping homeless and low-income families achieve sustainable independence.

"It's easier to work with a local group because they have boots on the ground," Menzies said. "And most of these cars are given away without any fanfare."

Menzies said about a third of the donated vehicles go to salvage and help with the nonprofit's operating costs along with inspection and maintenance of donated vehicles.

A local exchange

Dan Lubas, reporting secretary for the Shillington Lions Club, started an auto-donation program out of simple necessity around 2015. After the death of an older member, a local family was dispersing mostly health and medical items, which the Lions Club regularly appropriates for those in need, but among the personal property of this individual was a car.

"That's how I started the pro-



Eric Moyer of Moyer Nissan.

out the Lions Club."

All the money donated through the sale of a vehicle goes directly to the Lions Club's efforts in the local community through school programs, medical equipment programs, food banks and disaster assistance.

"We help people out, but we don't broadcast about it," Lubas said. "One hundred percent of every donation we get goes back to service the (local) people we help."

Fact sheet

PennDOT offers a fact sheet on donating a vehicle to a charitable organization, which divides procedures into owner and charitable organization responsibilities. Owners must follow the same procedures as a person selling a vehicle to a dealer or private individual when donating a vehicle. After taking possession of the vehicle, the charitable organization must apply for a title. Lubas' system does not require the nonprofit to take ownership of the vehicle.

Experts advise those looking for a tax write-off to read IRS Publication 4303, "A Donor's Guide to Vehicle Donations."

"In 2005 the tax laws changed," Menzies said. "Donations dropped, and we'll probably experience another drop because of (new) changes in the tax law."

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