



KIDS with a cause

Young advocates channel their love of animals into making a difference

BY ARNA COHEN

Ah, the carefree days of youth: leisurely afternoons with friends, endless summers with few responsibilities, and a world of possibilities not yet discovered.

Kids have it so easy, right?

It's tempting to think so—until you meet the likes of Ayna Agarwal, who's spent the free time of her formative years traveling overseas to establish spay/neuter programs in developing countries. Or Martin Welych-Flanagan, who decided at age 6 to educate his peers about the plight of animals killed in Canada's annual seal hunt. Or Ben Byrom, whose keen interest in politics and farm animal welfare led him to get out the vote in California.

For these exceptional kids and thousands of others, age is just a number. Ignoring the dictum that children should be seen and not heard, today's youth are finding their voices and speaking out to effect change for animals.

Kids want to help, says Heidi O'Brien, HSUS student outreach director, adding that her department receives e-mails every day from children responding to an HSUS commercial or something they've read in *KIND News*, the organization's classroom publication for primary school students. "A lot of them think they can do nothing because they're only kids. They see solicitations for donations, and they don't have money to give. They don't understand what they can do."

O'Brien's mission is to show kids that, regardless of age or economic status, they aren't helpless but actually wield a special power: a way of boiling things down to the essentials. Among the correspondence a legislator receives, for example, a letter from a child stands out. "I had one TV news anchor tell me that he can't hang up the phone if he hears a young voice on the line calling about an issue," says O'Brien.

As an outlet for children's enthusiasm and empathy for animals, HSUS outreach programs are designed to engage kids directly in the society's major campaigns, giving them the skills and confidence to become the next generation of advocates. Whether she's a kindergartener collecting pennies for homeless pets or a high schooler campaigning against puppy mills, every child can make a difference.

THE KID:

Ben Byrom, 15

THE CAUSE:

Ending factory farming; protecting seals

WHY WE LOVE HIM:

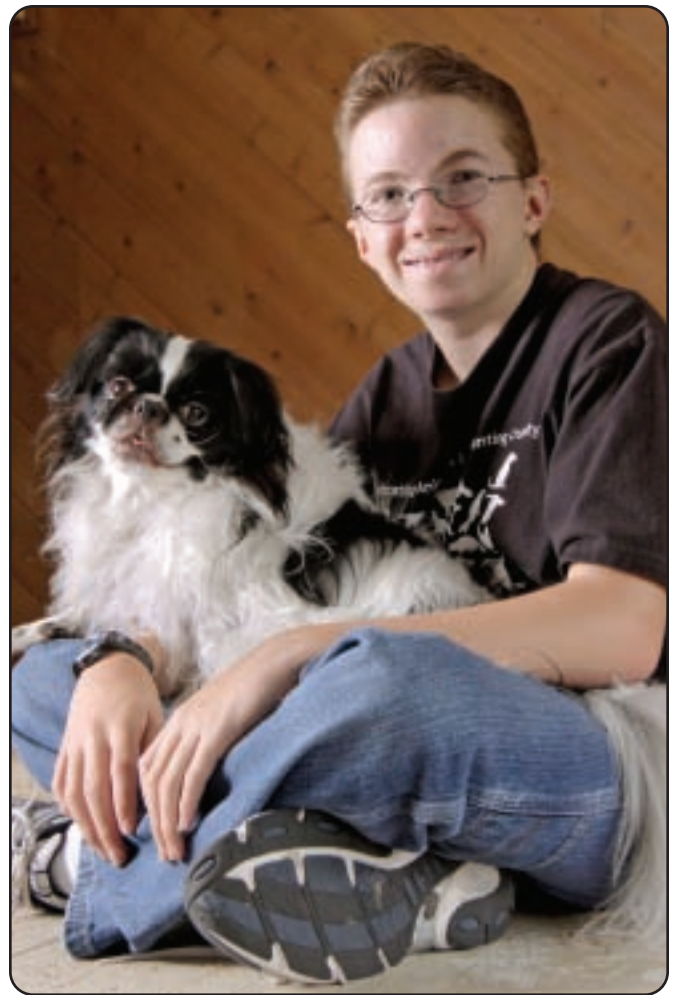
Civic-minded since he crawled out of the crib, Ben has already set his sights on running for office in 2030. "We are going to change the way America treats its animals," he says.

He's not old enough to vote, but that hasn't kept Ben Byrom from throwing himself into the political arena. In 2008, he hit the campaign trail hard in California to gather support for the Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act, a citizen-powered ballot initiative to release the state's egg-laying hens, pigs, and veal calves from extreme confinement.

By then this dedicated advocate was already a seasoned veteran, having started his campaigning at age 8 as a volunteer for the Animal Protection and Rescue League. Working to protect a harbor seal rookery slated to be removed from a beach in La Jolla, Calif., Ben manned the group's table at the Casa Beach Children's Pool every weekend, distributing information and gathering petition signatures. Six years later, Ben saw his dedication pay off when the California legislature passed a law allowing the seals to stay.

When he was 13, Ben heard a DJ talking about the farm animal ballot measure on the radio. Though a vegetarian, he knew nothing about factory farming. "I had thought that cows came from farms with the red barn, silo, rooster, and stuff," he says. When he learned what the farms were really like, he felt compelled to help registered voters gather signatures at Casa Beach and at events like Oktoberfest and an Earth Day festival. Once the measure was placed on the ballot, he moved on to getting out the vote.

Ben's favorite moment of the campaign occurred during a honk-and-wave event at a major intersection in La Mesa. His group held up signs urging drivers to show their support. "At the red light, all the cars were



honking. It was extremely loud!" he says. He was "gloriously happy" when that sentiment was backed by 63 percent of voters.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Ben uses the power of the pen in his advocacy efforts, and he's not shy about letting lawmakers know what he thinks. Last fall, he wrote to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger about a bill that would outlaw docking the tails of dairy cows, making this heartfelt plea: "As my Governor, you have the ability right now to help a lot of animals. ... I don't understand why anyone would want to cut a cow's tail off, but they shouldn't be allowed to do it. Not only does it hurt a lot to have part of your body cut off without any painkiller, but these cows need their tails to prevent attacks from biting flies. It's just wrong to take their tails away from them." The governor signed the bill and sent the teen a letter thanking him for his input and encouraging him to continue his political involvement.

Though a demanding school schedule curtailed Ben's advocacy efforts this year, he continues to monitor HSUS action alerts, regularly firing off e-mails to his legislators in support of the organization's campaigns and standing ready to do "whatever they need me to." Last spring, his eighth grade classmates honored Ben's energy and potential, voting him "most likely to create change in the world."



PREVIOUS SPREAD: MONTY/RAUSEN. THIS PAGE: BEN. OPPOSITE PAGE: STEPHEN BRASHAR.

THE KIDS:

Theresa Edwards, 14 and Audrey Long, 15

THE CAUSE: Stopping puppy mills

WHY WE LOVE THEM: Age is no object to Theresa and Audrey, whose mantra is encapsulated on their website, projectpupmills.kk5.org: "We're two kids just like you with a passion for animals. Youth are a powerful force in creating change!"

Theresa Edwards and Audrey Long went all the way to their state capital to express their outrage about puppy mills, testifying before Washington state lawmakers in Olympia.

They had to take days off to do it—not from work, but from middle school.

Friends since the first grade, the Seattle teens became aware of puppy mills in the third grade and have spent endless hours on the HSUS website, keeping up with rescue missions and tracking bills all over the country. A fifth-grade class trip to the state capital in 2007 made the girls realize that the average citizen could play a role in shaping laws.

"We got really excited when we visited Olympia ..." says Audrey. "We decided to work on puppy mills." She and Theresa wrote letters to their state representatives and senator, asking them to introduce a bill that would set higher care standards for large breeding facilities.

To their surprise, Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles responded with interest, though she said it was too late to take action that year. True to her word, in February 2008, Kohl-Welles introduced a "lemon law" bill designed to protect consumers who unknowingly purchased a sick puppy from a pet dealer; she notified Theresa and Audrey that a hearing was being held the following day.

The girls dropped everything to attend. They'd planned to simply observe, but after learning that any interested party could sign up to testify, they added their names to the sign-up sheet.

The friends were nervous about their moment in the limelight, Theresa recalls. "We didn't have anything prepared at all because we'd just found out. ... It was scary, but looking back on it, it was such a good experience."

The bill died in committee, but the friends' campaign had just begun. Determined to make change, the girls met throughout the spring and summer to map out a plan of action, complete with a flow chart. Additional research showed them that the bill they'd testified for was far from

ideal; it addressed buyers' rights rather than dogs' welfare and contained no provisions for raising the standards of care at puppy mills. They wrote a second letter to the legislature detailing essentials such as cage space, food and water, and medical attention.

The girls were thrilled when Kohl-Welles introduced a new bill in January 2009 that contained all the requirements detailed in their letter. Audrey and Theresa kicked into high gear, forgoing schoolwork to testify before the state House and Senate rules committees, send out mass mailings, and call every member of both committees. The bill passed, and the pair proudly watched as Gov. Christine Gregoire signed it into law in April 2009. The law took effect early this year.

Being "just kids" proved to be no deterrent to the confident teens. Lawmakers sat up and took notice when the girls spoke, "especially the time we testified with notes!" says Audrey.

In February, Theresa experienced political life firsthand when she spent a week in Olympia serving as a page for Kohl-Welles. The girls give presentations in the community and recently launched a Facebook page, using the powerful social media site as a tool to end the cruelty of puppy mills.



Audrey, left, and Theresa with Wilma



THE TEACHER: KRISTINA CAMPBELL

THE CAUSE: Animal C.A.R.E. (Compassion, Advocacy, Respect, Education) Club

WHY WE LOVE HER: Five years ago, Campbell noticed something missing among her school's student organizations: a group devoted to animal protection. She quickly rectified the omission—and today, the club is so popular that the auditorium is the only space large enough to accommodate its 100-plus members.

Kristina Campbell's animal protection club has helped raise the status of animals among the student body at Sweetwater High School in National City, Calif.—a feat underscored one day in 2008 when a student presented the English teacher with a disturbing problem.

"A student came to school and told me about kittens thrown out in a black trash bag," Campbell says. "He took me to the location ... and sure enough there were four newborn kittens. Before the club, the student wouldn't have had anyone to reach out to. I knew the club was effective because the student admitted to not really liking cats."

Spreading the message that animals need protection, students in the Animal C.A.R.E. Club have organized and hosted vet care and spay/neuter clinics, campaigned for Proposition 2 and the Casa Beach seals in La Jolla, protested at a circus, participated in a fur-free promotional event, and aired an HSUS dogfighting PSA for the entire school. They've also volunteered at the local animal shelter and raised money for a sanctuary in Rosarito, Mexico. And the club helped pave the way for a job training program that allowed students throughout the school to earn certificates qualifying them for work at a veterinary office, kennel, or dog day care center.

Remarkable by any standard, the group stands out in a community like National City, one of California's poorest municipalities. "When people are worried that the lights are going to be turned off, animal care cannot be a priority," says Campbell. The club "tries to give pet owners options. If a student comes to me with a litter of puppies, I use my contacts to spay and neuter, vaccinate, and find responsible homes. I also use that opportunity to provide spay/neuter resources for the breeding parents."

The club functions at times as a stand-in for the city's only animal shelter, which is overwhelmed, underfunded, and often misunderstood. "In a community like ours, Animal Services are the people who 'take away animals,' " says Campbell. " ... Approaching the club is far less threatening."

Of the stray pets students bring to her, Campbell noticed that few wore



identification tags. "I thought, 'These animals are ending up at the shelter ... but this community can't afford \$100 to get the dog out.' " She arranged for a donation of a tag-making machine, with the goal of distributing free tags to the owners of every pet in National City.

Operating 15 minutes north of the U.S.-Mexican border, Campbell and her students strive to overcome cultural obstacles as well as financial ones. "One student sneaked her dog onto the spay/neuter mobile clinic when it was here because her family wouldn't approve of it being neutered," she says, noting that such incidents are not unique.

While the club has become a great asset to the community, it's the students who've benefited the most. "When we volunteered at our local shelter, the students got it," Campbell says. "Walking by the enormous fridge where euthanized and deceased animals go is powerful. Therefore, they cannot ignore it. The students become walking advertisements, advocates for homeless animals and pet owners who spay and neuter."

A sense of empowerment has been the greatest benefit for students like Christina Dickey, last year's club president and senior class salutatorian. This fall, she begins studies at the University of California, Davis, the first step on a career path of helping animals. "I'm so proud," says Campbell. "Without Animal C.A.R.E., I don't think she would ... become a veterinarian."





THE KID:

Martin Welych-Flanagan, 10

THE CAUSE: Putting an end to Canada's yearly seal hunt

WHY WE LOVE HIM: Martin had been selling bead bracelets to earn money for a Lego set, but when he found out that his favorite animals were being hunted for their fur, he redirected his talents.

Martin Welych-Flanagan's fascination with seals began in preschool, when he fell in love with a plush baby harp seal toy and asked if he could take it home with him every day. A few years later, while he was looking at photos of his favorite animal on the Internet, his mother suddenly covered his eyes so he wouldn't see the bloodied bodies of pups who'd been clubbed to death during Canada's annual seal hunt.

But the truth wouldn't stay hidden for long: The 6-year-old discovered soon enough that his beloved seals were being slaughtered to make fur coats. Not only that, but the hunt was legal.

"I was outraged that such a beautiful animal was being killed for no good reason," says the Syracuse, N.Y., resident.

Martin and his mother wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper, and he also asked his teacher if the class could form a club to help the seals. In the interest of fairness, his teacher allowed everyone with a community service idea to make presentations, and the students voted on their favorite. Martin's won. "He's very persuasive," says his mother, Anita.

The Seal Savers Club's first project was to petition the Canadian prime minister to stop the hunt. The club then began designing and selling \$1 bead bracelets with messages such as "Save a Seal" and "No Fur," collecting more than \$1,000 for The HSUS's Protect Seals Campaign. When The HSUS featured Martin as a "humane hero" online, bracelet orders came in from all over the country.

Martin's efforts were also recognized by the Disney Corporation, which awarded him the \$5,000 grand prize in its "Littlest Volunteers" competition. He donated half the money to his school and traveled to HSUS headquarters in Gaithersburg, Md., to present president and CEO Wayne Pacelle with a check for the rest, using the opportunity to sell more bracelets to staff members. Later that day, Martin visited U.S. Rep. Dan Maffei, D-N.Y., in his Capitol Hill office to discuss the International Whale Conservation and Protection Act—and sold bracelets to the lawmaker's staff.

Despite a speech impediment for which he receives regular therapy, Martin speaks without a

bit of hesitation or self-consciousness when discussing the seal hunt. "Martin's determination helps him transcend his speech articulation issue," says Anita. He's made presentations at his speech therapy clinic, as well as at Cazenovia College and an HSUS meeting in Syracuse. And he sees every casual conversation as an opportunity to lobby for his cause. At The HSUS's New York Humane Lobby Day in Albany this April, state Sen. John DeFrancisco bought a bracelet.

Martin's creations have been in such demand that his grandmother and two great aunts are helping with production. He's raised another \$500 for the seals and says he'll continue making sales until the hunt is ended. Martin plans to attack the hunt on other fronts by setting up a Facebook page and asking local grocery stores and restaurants to participate in the boycott of Canadian seafood. Not bad for a guy who just turned 10.

Way to Go!



THE KID: **Ayna
Agarwal, 17**

THE CAUSE: Helping strays in developing countries

WHY WE LOVE HER: Ayna has never let the word “no” stand in her way. Told she was too young to volunteer at shelters, she collected donations and supplies for them instead. Before long, she was raising money for animals around the world.



As a little girl, Ayna Agarwal was afraid of animals—until her father brought home a white ball of fluff who showed her the light. “I owe everything to my dog,” says Ayna, now 17. “... She was the one who changed my mind. It’s that undying love.”

After Muffy’s arrival nine years ago, Ayna started noticing the cute puppies in the pet store at the mall, but her curiosity dissipated when she learned about puppy mills and pet overpopulation. She wanted to volunteer at an animal shelter, but each one she approached told her she was too young.

Disappointed but undaunted, Ayna decided to promote pet adoptions by making posters featuring available animals and hanging them around her hometown of Edison, N.J. Rain ruined the posters, but not Ayna’s spirits. “I felt I was making a difference, and that was the most important thing,” she says.

Ayna next tackled a shelter supply drive, distributing fliers that asked for donations of pet food, toys, beds, and other materials. When she was 14, her advocacy took a profound turn during a trip to India as part of an Indian classical dance troupe. Though she’d visited relatives in New Delhi many times before, this was the first time she understood the suffering she saw in the streets: dogs who were hurt, filthy, and starving. “I realized the situation is [much] worse in India, and I couldn’t stand it. ... That’s not the quality of life they deserve. So I decided to do something.”

Back home, Ayna pondered the problem for weeks. “I came up with the idea of sterilizing the animals. I could fundraise here,” she says. She started making contacts and gathering pledges without saying a word to her parents. By the time she informed her mother of her plans for a return trip, she already had \$500 in hand and

was aiming for another \$500 before leaving. Her mother was astonished, says Ayna, but agreed to accompany her daughter on the journey.

After working with the American embassy in New Delhi to identify reputable organizations, Ayna spent every day at a shelter in town, cleaning, feeding the animals, and meeting with management to draw up a spending plan for the funds she had raised.

Ayna’s Indian summer inspired her to found Stop Pet Overpopulation Together Globally, which has helped provide food to animals in India, expand shelter space in Thailand, and supply toys and medications for spay/neuter surgery patients. She also raised more than \$10,000 to sterilize cats and dogs in Thailand, the Philippines, and India. She’s drawn upon her own experiences to create action plans for kids with soup-to-nuts instructions for organizing and executing an idea. And she has run a weeklong animal-oriented summer camp for more than 100 children, made regular presentations at elementary schools, and served on The HSUS’s Youth Advisory Board.

In March, Ayna joined other teens from around the world at the Just Peace Summit in New York City, where she learned how to use media and technology to move her projects forward. She’s now attending Stanford University with the goal of becoming a veterinarian. She sees the new environment as an opportunity to expand SPOT Globally into the college crowd and beyond.

“Persistence has been the one thing that has made me successful and enabled me to help animals the way I have and be happy in the process,” she says. She urges other kids to develop the same tenacity. “No matter the setbacks [or] how many dissenters, continue doing what you believe in.” ■

WEB EXTRA: Read about other kids making a difference for animals at humanesociety.org/magazine.

