

Shirley Oracle

Puppy Love: Because No Dog Should Suffer in a Puppy Mill

M.E. Jones, Correspondent - 4/17/2009

DEVENS – Kathryn Wheeler, an eighth-grade student at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School at Devens, is already an aspiring entrepreneur, and a young woman with a cause. The same might be said of her Youth Venture teammates, Parker students Avanti Mohan and MacKenzie Mills.

The Youth Venture project, “Puppy Love,” that the three teens hope to launch soon and complete within a year seeks to raise awareness of the piteous plight of puppies sold in malls and pet stores and to end the abuse. It was Wheeler’s brainchild. “I really care about puppies,” she said. As the daughter of a pet caregiver, she has experience as well as emotion to draw on. The 14-year-old said she sometimes helps out at her mom’s dog day care business, “Bark-O-Lounge” in Groton.

The worksheet format of the proposal that Wheeler submitted to Youth Venture poses key questions such as what inspired the idea and how it will help the community. “I came up with my idea because every time I go to the mall I see little puppies ... stuck in tiny cages, whimpering and it always makes me cry.” Wheeler wrote. “There is no way these puppies are being treated fairly and like a dog should.”

Wheeler said she thinks that people should be made aware of the situation so they won’t buy pets at these stores, because that continues the abusive cycle. “I believe my venture will help the community because many people don’t have the power or the voice to speak up for these dogs,” she wrote. “I know that people would be able to sleep better at night knowing that these dogs are no longer being unfairly treated.” People have the power to help dogs, but the dogs can’t help themselves, she pointed out.

According to the project proposal that Wheeler and Mohan presented to a Youth Venture panel at the school recently, their concern is that the puppies, mostly produced in “puppy mills,” are neglected and badly treated. Data they’ve collected tells the story, including pictures of puppies kept in cramped, dirty cages, and puppies with matted fur and skin eruptions. Mohan said food and water dishes in their cages are often made for hamsters, not dogs. They don’t get medical care, she said, and may be sold sick, or with broken bones. The dogs are emotionally hurt, too, she said. “Tons of people have no idea what’s going on.”

Beyond the cause, venture projects live to succeed. The Puppy Love proposal came with a recipe, citing criteria the organization looks for in the ventures it sponsors: An issue, goals and ideas, an action plan, a budget and a timeline. Panel members were Amanda Levine, a former Spanish teacher at the school who also volunteers at the Sterling Animal Shelter, and Sen. James Eldridge. Their Youth Venture “champion,” (project mentor) is Carrie Duff, who teaches at the school.

Wheeler and Mohan said they hope to recruit more team members as the initiative moves forward. They’ll work on the project during “choice block” periods at school, she said. The first step was to win Youth Venture’s seal of approval, along with \$1,000 in seed money to get started. The money is to cover startup costs such as printing an informative brochure. It would also pay for items to sell at fundraisers, such as “Puppy Love” T-shirts and dog dishes.

Ultimately, the team would like to see a law passed, they said. “What is it you want to have made illegal?” Parker School Principal Teriann Schrader asked. “Not to have puppies treated that way,” Mohan answered. Eldridge said the idea seems viable and would be likely to draw support among lawmakers.

When the panel retired to deliberate, the two proponents chatted with guests, including Bill White of the United Way, one of Youth Venture’s major funding partners. Launched in 1996, Youth Venture is a worldwide organization whose vision is “that everyone in society can take initiative and address social needs,” versus “an elite few.” The organization operates from the premise that if more people “take initiative” in the world, they can solve more of its problems, especially if the problem-solving ethic starts early. Encouraging initiative in young people via projects it sponsors, the goal is to spark “positive change,” according to Youth Venture’s Web site. Corporate partners include big-name businesses all over the world, such as Ben and Jerry’s, Best Buy, Pepsi, Staples, Starbucks, Nike, CNN and MTV, to name a few.

The panel returned quickly with “warm” feedback but decided to hold “cool” feedback for later. The panel recommended a green light for Puppy Love. “We are really passionate about our goal and want it to succeed,” Wheeler said of the venture.