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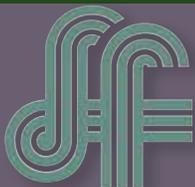
PROMOTING RESPECT FOR ALL LIFE THROUGH EDUCATION



SERVICE DOGS: A Bond and Partnership Like No Other

*By Molly Neher
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Atlas co-founders Michael and Jennifer Kolar and their service dogs Turner and Theo at the top of Mount Sneffels, CO. With their dogs by their side, no mountain is too high for this father/daughter team. Photo by Jennifer Kolar.



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HEALING FROM VIOLENCE THROUGH HUMANE EDUCATION

By Jeannie Russell, Service Learning Director at HEART (teachheart.org)



Note: Although this was written prior to the temporary closure of some New York City facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both HEART and the Urban Resource Institute have adapted their operations to be able to safely continue serving their beneficiaries.

As of April 2020, the Caring Circles program described below is still fully intended to continue, if necessary, in a modified format.



The link between animal cruelty and abuse toward vulnerable populations such as children, elders,

and domestic partners is well-established, highlighting the critical importance of introducing humane education into the lives of all youth as a preventive measure. The principles and practices of humane education offer young people an opportunity to recognize and respect the needs of other beings in ways that speak directly to their hearts—expanding their capacity for empathy and helping to shape their development as responsible and compassionate members of society. Humane education can also play an important role in the healing process when harm from interpersonal abuse has already occurred. That insight has sparked a unique partnership in the New York City area between a leading humane education organization and a leading shelter provider for families fleeing domestic violence.

Humane Education Advocates Reaching Teachers (HEART) and Urban Resource Institute (URI) are two organizations whose missions overlap around the core principle of

centering compassionate action in all of their projects and programs. HEART is a nonprofit organization offering innovative educational resources and programs in a wide variety of both traditional and non-traditional learning settings, with the goal of fostering a generation of compassionate youth creating positive change for animals, people, and the natural world. URI is the largest provider of domestic violence shelter in the nation, with the capacity to serve nearly 1,250 adults and children each night. Additionally, URI is also the only domestic violence shelter provider in New York City to accept survivors into emergency and long-term shelter with their pets, through their innovative People and Animals Living Safely (PALS) program.

This year, HEART has partnered with URI to support youth programming at URI’s PALS Place domestic violence shelter. PALS Place, and URI’s six other shelter locations within the PALS program, are among only a handful of domestic

violence shelters nationwide that accept and provide appropriate space for any species of companion animal family member along with their human family in search of protection and a new beginning after experiencing the trauma of intimate abuse. The pain of abandoning a beloved companion animal has far too often been a barrier to seeking safety for women and children in abusive situations; programs like PALS recognize that our companion animals are truly family members whose loss during these already traumatic times of transition to safety can be devastating.

The youth who are in transition to permanent housing in the PALS program have experienced violence, home and school disruption, and a host of related personal challenges. These factors leave them especially vulnerable to depression, reactive

behavioral patterns, and a pervasive distrustful attitude that can have a lasting impact on their social-emotional development. HEART worked with staff at PALS Place to build upon the strong bonds that young people feel with their companion animals, and to provide these children with an opportunity to strengthen their roles as positive caregivers at a time when loss and anger can erode agency and self-esteem.

The result was the creation of a specialized Caring Circles program for the school-aged youth in shelter using the Transformative Learning Alliance's Everyday Circles Cards, which combine humane



education topics, restorative justice practices, and social-emotional learning skills in engaging and easy-to-use group activities.

Everyday Circles is itself a collaboration between HEART, the Peace Learning Center, and the Tribes Learning Community, who came together to establish the Transformative Learning Alliance in 2018. HEART provided its humane education expertise and a set of active learning resources that foster empathy, reverence, and kind actions toward all living beings. The Peace Learning Center and Tribes contributed effective, evidence-based activities that promote restorative justice responses to conflict and harmful actions, as well as proactive practices for building a culture of respect and responsible behavior.

The Caring Circles program that HEART and URI are piloting consists of weekly groups facilitated by PALS Place staff. These groups are carefully designed to illuminate and practice the multiple ways that compassionate action in our relationships with other people, with the animals in our lives, and in



our connection to the natural world makes our own daily lives safer, healthier, and happier. Structured around the visualization of a Circle of Compassion that encompasses the people, animals, and places that participants care about, the youth practice mindfulness techniques, learn about and take leadership in adding to a set of Peaceful Actions for maintaining a respectful and kind group process, and play fun group games that also nurture core social-emotional competencies and build empathy for the animals with whom they share the world, as well as respect for the living natural habitats sustaining us all.

While most of the Caring Circles games have a specific topic, they are all designed to stimulate discussion that makes connections between that topic and core areas of social-emotional development. This is exemplified in an activity focusing on empathy building for companion animals that asks the participants to listen to a brief story, “Bailey the Dog.” Bailey loves to jump on his

who is getting frustrated and angry with him. The group is then asked to share ideas for how Bailey’s guardian might train him not to jump on her lap, to think about whether punishment or humane training techniques are likely to be more effective, and to connect their brainstormed ideas for helping Bailey with how they themselves learn to act in ways that respect the needs of others.

While this activity has the clear humane goals of teaching young people good training techniques and maintaining a positive relationship with their dog, it also serves as a way of framing the importance of restorative strategies for responding to other people who might be making them angry and frustrated.



behavior, it is important that youth not only learn restorative practices for managing conflict, but also

learn that there is no such thing as bad behavior, only actions that can harm or disrespect others. Just like lovable Bailey, they are always fundamentally accepted, can learn ways to manage their impulses or feelings, and can even help others do so too. Activities like this one are enhanced by weekly discussions of strategies for Peaceful Actions, mindfulness training, and a check-in go-around that gives participants a chance to bring difficulties they are facing to the group, where empathy and supportive responses are expected.

As part of the program, these Caring Circles groups are complemented by hands-on activities and projects the shelter recreation staff implement during the week between each session, intended to reinforce and extend humane education topics that the group may have introduced around animal welfare, social justice, and environmental ethics. These might include poster making or other art/craft projects; playing online games and watching videos



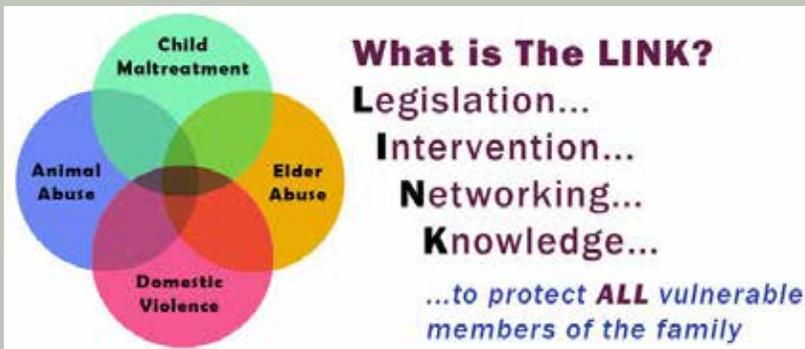
guardian’s lap, but he is growing to be very large—and this is becoming uncomfortable for his guardian,

shelter setting, where emotional and physical abuse has often been masked as “discipline” for “bad”

that highlight humane topics; and participating in service activities like helping parents with daily tasks, keeping the shelter’s common areas free of trash, making bird feeders and nesting boxes, sharing tips with others on animal care, spreading kindness through “random acts” or compliments, or being a “study buddy” to someone who needs help with homework.

We’re excited by the potential this partnership has to bring the core tenet of humane education—that all living beings have inherent value, and that compassionate actions on behalf of others have profound restorative effects—especially to the lives of youth who are suffering the consequences of violence and disruption. HEART and URI are staying in close contact as their staff pilot the Caring Circles program, and hope to be able to introduce the program to the other domestic violence shelters soon. From there, it can be made available as a resource to other shelters more broadly. 🐾

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The LINK-Letter is a monthly report from the National Resource Center on the Link between animal abuse and human violence. www.NationalLinkCoalition.org

Phil Arkow, Coordinator and Editor

As we recognize Domestic Violence Awareness Month, analysis of the FBI’s data system is starting to show Links between animal abuse and other crimes. The animal/human violence Link was cited in the need for a federal animal cruelty crimes division. And the need for more pet-friendly domestic violence shelters is called urgent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the National Link Coalition is compiling a list of schools of social work that teach human-animal relationships, and veterinary hospital policies on reporting suspected animal abuse.

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– Just send an e-mail to Coordinator Phil Arkow arkowpets@snip.net
Please tell us what organization(s) you’re with and where you’re located.

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