AN INTERVIEW WITH
JENIFER GRAHAM

FOLLOWING YOUR CONSCIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Jenifer Graham's name may not be a household word, but her refusal to dissect a frog in a high school biology class in 1987 because of her moral beliefs was reported in dozens of newspapers across the country. For more than a year, Jenifer, with support from The HSUS and our attorneys, resisted efforts by the Victor Valley (California) district school board to require her to dissect or accept a lowered biology grade and a negative evaluation on her school transcript.

Jenifer attended the 1988 HSUS annual conference in October to participate in a workshop on alternatives to dissection and receive a special award. At that time, Dr. Randall Lockwood, HSUS director of higher education programs, had an opportunity to talk to Jenifer about the events of the past months.

Lockwood: You obviously have a strong commitment to animals to have gone through all the pressures of the last year. Where do you think these feelings came from?
Graham: I've always loved animals. I grew up in a caring family. I have a dog we rescued from the desert, a mixture of all kinds of breeds, and two turtles and three tanks of fish. I learned a lot from my mom, but my refusal to dissect was all my own decision.

Lockwood: How would you describe your basic philosophy about animals?
Graham: I see animals as being as close to me as my friends and family. They just happen to have very different kinds of bodies, but we are all related by being alive.

Lockwood: Were there any particular events that helped shape your interest in helping animals?
Graham: Once, when I was about four, I found a baby bird that had fallen out of a tree. I was starting to pick it up with a plastic bag so it wouldn't get my scent and some bullies came along and stomped on it. That really hurt me.

When I was older, my mom took me to a rodeo and all I could think about was what the animals were feeling. It didn't seem right to me.

Lockwood: What people have inspired you the most?
Graham: I really admire Jane Goodall for all her studies, and she seems so warm, yet so strong.

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GRAHAM CASE CHRONOLOGY

SPRING 1984  Jenifer objects to dissection in her seventh grade biology class in Omaha, Neb., and is allowed to use alternatives without penalty.

SUMMER 1986  She is told that dissection will be optional in her classes at Omaha Central High School.

FALL 1986  Jenifer transfers to a high school in Arlington, Tex., where she coordinates a movement to stop a school exhibit in which a young rat is being fed only junk food.

JANUARY 1987  She moves to Victorville, Calif., and enrolls in Victor Valley High School. She is told by a counselor “not to worry” about her objections to dissection.

MARCH 1987  Jenifer declines to participate in an earthworm-dissection project but receives an “A” on the exam.

APRIL 1987  She is told to participate in a frog-dissection lesson. Upon requesting alternatives, she is sent to the principal, who advises her “to get a lawyer if she feels that strongly.”

The HSUS is contacted by Jenifer’s mother. Attorneys O.J. Ramsey and Roger Kindler begin negotiations with school authorities, asking them to allow Jenifer to undertake a rigorous regimen of alternative studies in lieu of the dissection.

Jenifer’s case is presented to the Victor Valley Union High School District Board, which votes five to zero to return the issue to the teacher and principal. They continue to refuse to allow her to use alternatives without penalty.

Because she refuses to perform the dissection, Jenifer receives a “zero” for the exercise, lowering her grade from an “A” to a “C,” with the added notation that she refused the teacher’s order.

JUNE 1987  After attempts at negotiations fail, HSUS attorneys file suit in federal district court against the Victorville, Calif., school board and other school district officials and teachers. They allege that Jenifer’s deep respect for animal life is equivalent to religious belief and is worthy of First Amendment protection.

OCTOBER 1987  Apple Computer releases a television commercial featuring Jenifer as a “frog advocate” promoting the use of computer alternatives.

DECEMBER 1987  After only three national showings, Apple removes the Jenifer Graham ad from circulation prior to the Christmas season, presumably due to pressure from biomedical-research interests disturbed by the publicity.

MARCH 1988  California Governor George Deukmejian signs a bill requiring that elementary and secondary students be allowed to choose whether or not to dissect animals in science classes, to become effective in January of 1989. Jenifer Graham is a key witness in support of this students’ rights bill.

JUNE 1988  U.S. district court rules that the state education system does not require dissection for preparation for admission to California colleges or universities, undermining one of Victor Valley’s major arguments in its refusal to allow Jenifer to receive credit for alternative study.

AUGUST 1, 1988  Judge Manuel Real dismisses Jenifer’s suit, noting that parties are close enough to agreement to allow a compromise. He proposes that the school test Jenifer’s knowledge of frog anatomy by using photographs of a dissection of a frog that died of natural causes. The school agrees to attempt to meet these requirements and to remove the notation of refusal to dissect from her record. (Jenifer had received no word that an appropriate frog had been found as of November 1988.)

Lockwood: Let’s talk about frogs. Why do you think your school was so firm in refusing to allow you to get credit for using alternatives to learn frog anatomy?

Graham: My teacher and the principal really didn’t want their authority threatened. They kept insisting that kids would refuse to run laps in gym or bake cakes in home economics. My teacher kept telling us we had to dissect frogs to learn human anatomy.

We spent three weeks on the frog but only one week on how human bodies work!

Lockwood: What did you do instead of dissection to learn about frogs?

Graham: The HSUS got me a tutor. He made sure that all of the alternatives I used met the California requirements. The things that made the biggest impression on me, that were the most fun, were the ones dealing with plants and live animals.

The school board complained that I wouldn’t get hands-on experience, so I used tools like a scalpel and probe to dissect plants and fruits of all different kinds, like mushrooms and palm roots. I did an earthworm lab where I watched their behavior in different kinds of soil.

For the frog, I got my tutor’s frog for about a week. I watched his movements. I observed how he swam in a tub and really got to see his personality! To learn the insides, I used a very detailed model and transparencies and the computer program and did a lot of reading.

Jenifer Graham accepts a special award from The HSUS at the annual conference banquet held in Washington, D.C.
Miss Graham explains to Dr. Randall Lockwood of The HSUS her refusal to dissect a frog in a high school biology class.

Lockwood: How did the other students react as word got around about your refusal?

Graham: I had support from my friends, but there were people who didn’t know the whole story, who just thought I was squeamish. But no one else was willing to risk his grade by refusing to dissect.

Lockwood: What about the other teachers?

Graham: My history teacher was really supportive. He used my case to make a point about the importance of the Constitution and freedom of religious belief.

Lockwood: As word about you spread, what kind of reaction did you get from other students around the country?

Graham: I got tons of letters! The school would call me down to the office every day to pick up my mail. Sometimes there would be twenty letters, sometimes a hundred! I tried to answer them all at first, but then it got to be too much.

Lockwood: What kinds of reactions were you getting?

Graham: All of them were supportive except two. One said, “If you feel that way about frogs, I hope you’re a vegetarian (which, of course, I am) because they kill animals for food, too!” Then, there was one from someone with the California Biomedical Research Association lecturing me about the need for animals in research. They got [even with] me on the Apple ad, though [by pressuring the computer company to remove an ad featuring Jenifer from distribution—see sidebar].

Lockwood: What about the teachers? They kept asking what I had eaten over the last few days, to make sure I was a vegetarian. They wanted me to show them all my makeup to make sure it really was cruelty-free, stuff like that!

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Lockwood: What are your plans now?

Graham: I’ll still graduate. I have a passing average. I have to take the SAT tests and I want to go on to college. I want to do science and I want to work with animals, probably studying animal behavior. I’m really interested in oceanography.

Lockwood: What would be your advice to other students who find themselves in your situation?

Graham: Don’t be afraid. Stand up for what you feel. Too many people hold back!

Lockwood: Having seen what happened, would you go through this again if you had to?

Graham: Absolutely!