

AS SEEN ON TV

HSUS team brings animal advocacy to Tinseltown

by MICHAEL SHARP



Alice Ikeda sat up late, TV on in the background, her family sound asleep.

A producer for Screaming Flea Productions—the company behind A&E’s *Hoarders* series—Ikeda often spends four nights a week on her sofa, sifting through 60 to 70 online submissions for the reality television show. On this night, one entry caught her eye.

The form was mostly blank, save for a name, address, and phone number—and then a jaw-dropping series of questions and answers toward the bottom.

Are there pets in the home? Yes

If yes, how many? 2,500

What kind of pets? Rats

“I just thought it was a prank,” Ikeda says. “And then we called the submitter.”

Turns out, it was anything but. A recently widowed Southern California man had allowed a few pet rats to breed—and breed and breed, until they had taken over his home.

“At that point it became, what do we do?” Ikeda remembers. “How do we deal with this? We’ve dealt with a hundred cats, 60 birds, kind of your average hoard of ani-

mals, but nothing in the realm of thousands.”

The first person she called: Jonny Vasic, director of The HSUS’s Animal Content in Entertainment program.

“We just thought it would be a really unusual situation that could really showcase what we do for hoarders, but also what HSUS does in terms of rescues,” Ikeda says, adding later: “In all honesty, we could not have done this without HSUS.”

Operating as part of The HSUS’s Hollywood Outreach team in Los Angeles, ACE program staff work with television producers, documentary and feature filmmakers, and others in the entertainment business to spotlight a range of animal-related issues, from captive hunting to the exotic pet trade.

In the case of the pet rats, Vasic served as a liaison between *Hoarders* and The HSUS’s Animal Rescue Team, which worked with North Star Rescue to assess the scene, remove the rats, and transfer them to a temporary shelter. Vasic’s background as a producer enabled him to help fulfill the needs of the animals while also satisfying the creative direction of a TV show with a narrative arc, Ikeda says. “So it’s not just about the process of ‘We need to do X, X, and X to rescue the animals appropriately’; he knows ... we have a story to tell. And he’s really great in facilitating that.”

In early 2011, more than 2 million households tuned in to watch

the rescue teams in action and learn more about the problem of animal hoarding. In July, the episode was nominated for a prime-time Emmy. And by December, more than 1,600 rats had been placed in new homes.



Fittingly, Vasic was born in Hollywood, though he grew up in Salt Lake City, where he made Super 8 films with his older brother—“little karate movies” and scenes with the family dogs.

Later, as a young teenager, he joined a few friends on a hunting trip into the Wasatch mountains—a particularly pivotal moment for this longtime animal lover. Vasic remembers watching a hunter dragging a dead deer through the snow, a trail of blood behind him: “I admired living, wild animals—and to see them end their life in such a pointless way, when it wasn’t needed for sustenance, it kind of really always stuck with me.”

After graduating from the University of Utah with a degree in television and film, Vasic’s career took him from the Sundance Film Festival, to art house films, to an independent TV production company. In 2005, he began volunteering for the marine wildlife conservation group Sea Shepherd, eventually serving as everything from

TELLING THEIR STORIES

Grant awards documentaries that educate and inspire

Finally free from the torture, Oliver the bear was now dying.

For years, large metal rings had been painfully embedded in his skin, holding a catheter into his abdomen. Infection had set in. His health was failing. And of all things, his convoy of rescuers was now caught in a massive traffic jam.

“Apparently in China, traffic jams can go on for days,” says filmmaker Martin Guinness. With the help of police, rescuers eventually got to a local hospital, where they borrowed an oxygen cylinder. “They actually performed surgery on the back of a truck to save this bear.”

The scene plays out in the documentary *Cages of Shame*, which examines the torturous practice of bear bile farming in China. In December, the film emerged from a record 88 submissions, from more than 20 countries, to win The HSUS’s 2011 Animal Content in Entertainment Documentary Film Grant.

“Literally, I screamed,” Guinness says of

his reaction to the \$20,000 award. “I thought, to hell with the neighbors, I’m going to enjoy this moment.”

The Eyes of Thailand, a look at one woman’s work to help elephants injured by land mines, took second place. The third-place winner was *Whale Like Me*, in which filmmaker and whale advocate Malcolm Wright documents his experiences onboard a Japanese whaling ship. The remaining final-



ist was *Vegucated*, which follows three New Yorkers as they attempt a vegan lifestyle and learn more about factory farming.

With nearly 50 documentaries to his credit, Guinness had long wanted to spotlight the bile farming of Asiatic black bears, known as moon bears for their crescent-shaped chest markings. Confined to small cages for years or even decades, the bears have catheters permanently inserted into their abdomens to extract bile, which is used in traditional Chinese medicines.

“It’s just one of the cruelest forms of torture that you could imagine,” says Guinness, who hopes that viewers get “indignant” and that the film provokes action against the practice. “I really, really wanted to draw the world’s attention to this intensely cruel and incredibly unnecessary thing that’s going on.”

➤ **THE HSUS** will begin accepting submissions for the 2012 ACE grant May 1. For details, check out humanesociety.org/ace.



The HSUS's Jonny Vasic greets rescued goats at an Animal Acres fundraiser in Los Angeles.

head vegan chef onboard a ship documenting the commercial seal slaughter, to the organization's international director.

There was the night, somewhere off the coast of New York, that Vasic awoke to the news that the ship was sinking, that everyone must report to the engine room to look for the leak. And then there was the time, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, that he ran a mile across the ice, at one point leaping a dangerous crevasse, to upload video of the seal hunt—footage that would reach Canada, the U.S., even Europe. Eventually, Vasic helped bring Sea Shepherd's work to an even larger audience, as he played a key role in creating Animal Planet's hugely successful show *Whale Wars*.

"At that point," Vasic says, "a light bulb went off in my head, and I realized I could merge my two loves: my love for animals and wanting to protect them, and my abilities as a producer." In 2009, he formed his own company, Evergreen Oasis Entertainment, to help incorporate animal issues into TV and film projects. A year later, The HSUS came calling.

"It was such a 'wow' moment," he remembers, "as the ACE program was exactly what I was doing, but now I get to do it for a group I admired and have been a longtime member of. I felt like it was something telling me, 'Yep, this is the direction you should go; this is a chance to make a real difference and make a big impact.'"



Ten months after Vasic started with The HSUS, *Animal Planet Investigates* took a national television audience behind the fences of captive hunting facilities, where—among a long list of head-shaking revelations—one operator admitted to tranquilizing his animals.

Featuring the work of undercover HSUS investigators, the epi-

sode helped build momentum for the Sportsmanship in Hunting Act, introduced last June in the House of Representatives, and it helped cement a new relationship between The HSUS and Pangolin Pictures, which worked closely with Vasic while producing the episode.

Like Ikeda, the producer for *Hoarders*, Pangolin Pictures president Kevin Bachar says Vasic's background in the business was an asset. "Jonny was part of the team ... looking at the treatments and figuring how best to put things together and ... the best way to go about it."

Occasionally, the ACE program works to keep certain practices out of the national spotlight and hence prevent their spread—like the time producers with *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* called about potentially using capuchin monkeys in a future episode to assist a paraplegic with tasks such as taking items out of cabinets, opening the refrigerator, and turning off lights. Vasic talked with his HSUS colleagues and learned about the horrible practices associated with using the monkeys as service animals—like pulling their teeth and subjecting them

to inhumane training methods. He encouraged the producers not to use them, and they agreed.

Alongside ACE program coordinator Colin McCormack and the rest of the Hollywood Outreach team, Vasic also helps form project marketing strategies, vets requests for HSUS undercover footage from the entertainment world, and makes HSUS experts available to producers and writers. And through its annual ACE Documentary Film Grant contest (see "Telling Their Stories," p. 22), the program awards \$20,000 to a filmmaker highlighting important animal protection issues.

"I believe just doing the activism or advocacy work is just not enough," Vasic says. "We need that and it's critical, but unless the majority of people know what's going on, real change and permanent change won't be possible. So I'm a huge believer in leveraging mass media in that way as a positive benefit for society.

"I'm always looking for the *edutainment* version of it. So, entertaining people, but they walk away with some education about an issue as well." ■

WATCH THE GENESIS AWARDS!

The Hollywood Outreach team hosted The 26th Genesis Awards on March 24 in Beverly Hills, Calif., honoring the news and entertainment media for producing outstanding works that raise awareness of animal issues. The show will air on Animal Planet May 5 at 4 p.m. (ET/PT) and May 6 at 8 a.m. (ET/PT); for a list of winners, go to humansociety.org/genesis.

