THE BOYS WHO CRIED WOOF

YOUNG ACTIVISTS PUSH TO CRACK DOWN ON PENNSYLVANIA’S PUPPY MILLS // BY KELLY HUEGEL

WHEN THE DEPASQUALE FAMILY decided to foster a puppy mill refugee, they had no idea the little bichon mix would take them all the way to the state capitol.

While volunteering with their parents through Castaway Critters in Harrisburg, Pa., Joey (age 13) and Anthony (age 12) encountered Franklin, a rescue from one of the state’s many inhumane breeding facilities. The person who had agreed to foster Franklin never showed up, so the organization asked the DePasquales to give it a shot.

Back home, Franklin “would just hide in the corner,” Anthony recalls. “It was really upsetting to see. When we held Franklin the first time, he was shaking like crazy.” As time went by, the tenacious pup made slow but steady progress, following family members around the house, then attempting to play. “We kind of fell in love with him,” says Anthony. “We couldn’t give him up,” Joey adds.

The DePasquales eventually opened their doors to more foster dogs, including a puppy mill rescue named Tilly. “Tilly was really bad,” remembers mom, Kate. “[She] had a broken jaw; [her] eyes went in two different directions. I mean, my vet actually cried when she saw her.”

Using Tilly as their “poster dog,” Joey and Anthony drafted an online petition calling for an end to Pennsylvania’s puppy mills and emailed friends, family, and schoolmates for support. They attended meetings of rescue groups. Kate contacted local and national organizations, including The HSUS, which publicized the petition on its Facebook page. “Overnight we got like 1,500 signatures,” says Kate.

In no time, the boys rocketed past their initial goal of 3,000 signatures. At last count, the total was more than 13,000, with signatures coming in from around the world. “It felt great just to see how many people were supporting us,” Joey remembers.

On Dec. 3, the boys, joined by Franklin, presented the signatures and a photo book showcasing puppy mill dogs to Gov. Tom Corbett, and urged him to do more to enforce Pennsylvania’s dog laws.

“I want to do this for my whole life,” says Anthony. “Help these dogs.”

JOEY & ANTHONY DEPASQUALE

YORK COUNTY, PA.

Home Schooling

Before they adopted a puppy mill rescue, Joey and Anthony already knew about Pennsylvania’s status as a notorious puppy mill state. The boys’ mother “started showing us what was going on, and we just immediately realized that it was wrong and we wanted to help,” Joey recalls.

All in the Family

Kate DePasquale first learned about puppy mills through a Facebook post. After researching the issue, she asked her family if they wanted to help. Last March, the boys started accompanying their parents on rescue missions. Kate recalls telling her sons, “ ‘Listen, we have to get up at 4 a.m. ’ And the kids were like, ‘We’re there. Let’s do it.’ ” That day, the family helped transport some of the 30-plus puppy mill dogs saved by Castaway Critters.

Peer-to-Peer

The boys started a school club called WOOF (Welfare of Our Friends) to spread the word about animal welfare issues. HSUS Pennsylvania state director Sarah Speed, who recently spoke to the group, praised the boys’ efforts. “It’s really awesome that they’re not just doing it, they’re getting everyone involved.”

READ about other grassroots activists who are making a difference for puppy mill dogs. Visit humanesociety.org/pmheroes.