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Humane Education Programs for Local Societies

By Frank J. McMahon, Washington, D.C.,
HSUS Director of Field Service

Although definitely I am not an educator, I believe that I still may be able to report usefully this afternoon some of what is being done in the field of humane education by some of our best local humane societies.

In the years that I have worked in and for The HSUS I have visited several hundred local humane societies—big and little, good and not so good, new and old, rich and poor, in all parts of the country. I have spent many days on analysis of the philosophy, policies, equipment, programs and personnel of those societies.

When I visit a local society I look first, as you might expect, at any animal shelter that it operates. But in a great many situations I give the most attention to the society's educational activities—or lack of them. From analysis of a humane society's attitude toward problems of education I can learn more about that society's level of intellectual maturity and moral philosophy than from study of any other facet of the society's operations.

I remember, for example, a visit in this last year with a society that had applied for affiliation with The HSUS. The society's small shelter was clean. The President was gracious. I found, however, that in the whole of the preceding year the society had issued no report to its relatively few members or the general public, the only newspaper publicity attained had been an occasional photograph of a dog (never a cat) available for "sale" and that the only leaflet or publication of any kind that the society had available for distribution was a booklet on dog care published by a dog-food manufacturer in which owners were advised not to have female dogs spayed unless some very extraordinary circumstance prevented them from "enjoying the pleasures that only your own litter of puppies can bring".

Perhaps the fundamental moral to be drawn from that incident is that The HSUS should intensify its own program of education of local humane societies. But for the moment let me stick to the deficiencies—I might fairly say the grotesquery—of the attitude of that particular local society to humane education. Before I left that town the Board of the local society and I had quite a long discussion of education.

The Directors began by reporting that their shelter was snowed under with homeless, unwanted, abandoned and neglected dogs and cats. They

talked about plans for enlarging the shelter but complained about lack of philanthropic financial support. I heard several stories about cruelties committed by children. There were gripes about lack of cooperation from local veterinarians. The consensus was expressed by the President, who said: "Mr. McMahon, this is a really terrible town for animals."

I think that every member of the Board thought that I was of wandering mind when I responded by asking how many Girl Scouts of the community had won animal-care proficiency badges in the last year.

And they obviously had to struggle to remain politely attentive when I followed that up, after they had explained that they didn't know that Girl Scouts had such a thing as an animal-care proficiency badge, by asking what the city editor of their small local daily newspaper thought of their shelter. It turned out that no one present knew the name of *any* editor or writer for the local paper—the photos of dogs available for sale were mailed to the paper by the shelter manager.

From our psychologist - professor - HSUS Director, Dr. James T. Mehorter, and from the director of our education department, Fred Myers, I have learned over the years that there are some very complex subtleties in the business of humane education. The idea is all loused up (if you will permit me to be fully expressive) with psychological and psychiatric concepts like *empathy, attitudes, psychopathology, frustrations, complexes*. I am perfectly convinced that these words indicate accurately the fundamental nature of what we must ultimately do in the field of humane education. But when I talk about humane education with most local humane societies I would be wasting my time and your money, besides running a risk of revealing my own ignorances, if I tried to talk as Jim Mehorter, Martin Winemiller and Fred Myers must talk when they are trying to influence the National Education Association or the education methodologists of a state board of education.

So to the Board of Directors of the little local society that I have been describing I talked about as follows.

The basic objectives of a good humane society, whether a national organization like the HSUS or the smallest local society, is to work itself out of business. The only worthwhile aim is to make ourselves unnecessary. We don't exist just to provide a euthanasia service or an animal exchange service for people who on the one hand want to get rid of animals and who on the other hand want cheap animals.

I asked the Directors to consider, earnestly, whether their shelter wasn't chiefly serving to make it easy for animal owners to be irresponsible.

(Don't misunderstand me, please. Animal shelters are necessary as long as animal owners *are* irresponsible; euthanasia is a kindness when animals are abandoned, ill or injured, unloved and unwanted. But no

animal shelter, operating in a vacuum, will elevate the public morality toward animals or the sense of responsibility of animal owners.)

And I recommended to that local society these educational activities:

1. Publication at least every two months of a printed (not mimeographed) report of society activities, full of anecdotes about interesting animal rescues and unusual services to the public, always including a non-statistical but revealing article about the magnitude of the work being done for animals and for the community.

2. Distribution of this bulletin to a carefully selected list of at least 1,000 persons (the city has a population of about 90,000 persons) and I recommended that one Director be given the responsibility of constantly and diligently building up that list, one name at a time, so that ultimately it would include every animal lover, every active humanitarian, every potential donor of funds and every influential citizen of the city—ministers, Scout-masters, the more thoughtful school teachers, officers of service clubs, city and county officials, and so forth.

3. Appointment of or even employment of a publicity chairman or publicity director, to concentrate on supplying to the newspaper and to the local radio and television station news items and material for feature articles about the society's work and goals.

4. Organization of expert instruction, by a member of the society, of Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts seeking animal care awards.

5. Publication and massive distribution, month in and month out, of an inexpensive folder about the evils of surplus breeding of cats and dogs, adapted to local circumstances and statistics from such HSUS publications as "Puppies and Kittens—10,000 Per Hour."

6. At least four courses in dog obedience training, every year, aimed especially at children in families that owned dogs.

7. A series of seminars (or arguments, if that term describes the idea better) in which Directors and the four employees of the society would thresh out the objectives of the society and the policies and procedures at the shelter that would promote those objectives.

That is as far as I went in the discussion of humane education with that particular society. That was all that the Board of Directors could be expected to absorb and accept at that time. It was not enough, of course. But, as a field worker in the humane movement who fights practical problems, I would be very happy if *all* local societies, or even a majority of them, were executing intelligently as much of a humane education program as I urged in this particular case.

Consider, please, what problems of that local society might be effected beneficently by merely the minimum educational work that we discussed.

A. The flow of surplus puppies and kittens into the shelter (and, let's be frank, on to euthanasia) could be reduced.

B. The number of strayed and abandoned animals might be reduced.

C. The attitudes of large numbers of children (here I'm talking about "attitudes" as Jim Mehorter and the other psychologists use the word) could be materially affected so that we might have more genuine humanitarians in the next generation.

D. Contributions of money would be increased, thereby making possible more work and better work.

E. The philosophical and ethical understanding of humane work and planning and execution of the work of the society would be elevated and improved.

Not a thing that I suggested is beyond the capacities of even the smallest humane society, provided only that there is enough brain power within the existing leadership to understand what is needed. Educational work of that kind doesn't cost money; it makes money. If you think of such things in dollars and cents terms, the truth is that no humane society, and especially the poorer societies that are closest to financial bankruptcy, can afford not to do this kind of educational work.

Humane education programs for local humane societies, of course, can and should be much more sophisticated, much more elaborate, much more pervasive of the entire community than the elementary projects that I have mentioned. In variety we can think of a range from promotion of school poster and essay contests to seminars on advanced psychology for school teachers. In terms of specific purposes we ought to cover everything from "how to feed a kitten" to "support the Randall Bill to protect laboratory animals." We should aim our education at kindergarten children but also at farmers trucking cattle to the stockyards.

Mel Morse is to be chairman of the conference committee that later will dig much more deeply into this subject and offer recommendations to the conference and the entire humane movement for improvement of our work in this field. I hope that Mel will find opportunity to tell you about what his own society, the Marin County Humane Society, is doing and initiating in the field of humane education. The Marin County Society is carrying this idea close to ideal levels. I wish that every society in the country could and would do what is being done and planned by the Marin County Society.

At this time, however, I would personally be very happy if all local humane societies would do just what I recommended to the society of which I have spoken. We could talk next year about further progress. It would be a very happy discussion, next year, because there would have been genuine humane progress in the meantime.