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Help Animals Touch the Hearts of Humans

In Fairfax, Virginia, the Shilo Project helps animals touch the hearts of humans in a beautiful way, offering juvenile offenders and at-risk youth the opportunity to socialize and interact with rescued, homeless dogs. It operates entirely on the principles of compassion, respect and responsibility. Juvenile offenders and at-risk youth are able to cultivate a healthy and nonviolent relationship with the dogs, while discovering how to make a difference in the lives of homeless companion animals. It brings together young people and homeless dogs, both of whom may not have experienced much affection in their lives. The group got its name from

We still haven't realized that owning a pet isn't just some kind of hobby.

— Dr. Alan Beck, director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University

a beloved shelter mutt named Shilo, who touched the hearts of many people.

Therapy Dogs

There are a growing number of specially trained therapy dogs visiting hospitals, nursing homes and mental health centers. Most people are familiar with dogs that assist people with physical disabilities, but these therapy dogs offer something different — they lift the spirits of the people they visit. Therapy dogs have a lasting effect on those they visit, enabling people to reconnect with comfort and love. To learn more, see Therapy Dogs International (www.tdi-dog.org).

From Awareness to Awe

Sadly, many people never enjoy the presence of animals. Regardless of how committed to animal welfare people may be, until they spend time with the animals they are trying to protect, they won't experience the real rewards of their work. The best way to help animals touch the hearts of other people is to let them touch your heart first. Spend time with shelter animals, shower affection on them and let them shower affection on you.

Don't limit it to companion animals. Visit someone's family farm and watch a newborn lamb take its first few wobbly steps. Let a pig sidle up to you to have its underbelly scratched. Offer to comb a horse's mane.

Your heart can be touched just as thoroughly by being in nature. Watching a duck



WENDY KEICHEL

Therapy dog Luke of Crosswinds.

land on an icy pond, skid playfully across the surface, plop into a snow bank and dust itself off will touch your heart. Watching a mother deer kiss the soft little nose of her fawn will do much the same. If, as I have, you're fortunate enough to be able to witness a mother orca whale teaching its baby how to swim, you will be truly amazed.

You've Been Touched: Now What?

You could follow the lead of the Shilo Project and develop your own unique path, or you could contact other groups to find out what has worked for them.

You could organize guided hikes in local parks or overnight camping trips into the backcountry.

Be sure such trips are led by a very knowledgeable guide. It's not just about seeing nature — it's about having your heart touched by it.

Trips to an organic family farm are a great way to help children and their families interact with animals. Again, the selection of your guide for such a trip is important. You don't want someone who's going to preach about the virtues of farming or the horrors of factory farming. Such a trip is about touching hearts, not politics.

Animal shelters are also a great way to touch people's hearts, particularly in urban areas. Team up with a shelter and help everyone. Companionship cultivates compassion.

The research shows!...

In 1995 Erika Friedman conducted a study at the University of Maryland Hospital involving 392 people. She found that heart attack patients who had dogs were eight times more likely to be alive a year later than those without dogs.

In 1999 the State University of New York at Buffalo conducted a study involving 24 stockbrokers who were taking medication for high blood pressure. The researchers found that adding a dog or cat to their lives helped stabilize and reduce their stress levels.

In 1999 Swedish researchers reported that children exposed to pets during the first year of life had fewer allergies and less asthma.

Furry fact — Cats and humans share a remarkable similarity — they have identical regions in the brain responsible for emotion.

- All Creatures animal stories: www.all-creatures.org/animal.html
- Animals in our Hearts: www.animalsinourhearts.com
- Best Friends Animal Society, animals helping people: www.bestfriends.org/atthesanctuary/humaneeducation
- Daily OM, animals as healers: www.dailyom.com/articles/2005/481.html
- The Shilo Project: www.shilohproject.org/index.html
- Therapy Pets: www.dogplay.com/Activities/Therapy/join.html