

High School Youth Leaders take "humane" back to school

SAFE HUMANE CHICAGO | MARCH 23, 2012 | BY: KATHY MORDINI

0

Like

0

Tweet

0

0

Get General Pets alerts!

Email

Sign up



1 photo

[View the full slideshow »](#)

RELATED TOPICS

- [Safe Humane Chicago](http://www.examiner.com/topic/safe-humane-chicago)
- [Dogs](http://www.examiner.com/dogs)
- [Cats](http://www.examiner.com/cats)
- [Pets](http://www.examiner.com/pets)
- [Pet Rescue](http://www.examiner.com/pet-rescue)

The media has given a lot of coverage lately to the growing trend of treating [pets as family members](#)

- **Chicago Animal Care and Control**

(<http://www.examiner.com/topic/chicago-animal-care-and-control>)

(<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/mid/1508/ArticleId/814/Default.aspx>), from the number of animals we keep in our homes to the billions of **dollars Americans spend on their furry companions**

(<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2012/03/03/spending-on-pets/>). Unfortunately, that doesn't tell the whole story. In many households, animal abuse is a regular occurrence, often with a strong connection to domestic violence.

In one study, approximately 71 percent of pet-owning women who enter shelters for protection report that their batterer had injured, maimed, killed or threatened family **pets** (<http://www.examiner.com/pets>) as a revenge or control method. Another 25 to 40 percent of women say they delayed leaving abusive situations because they were worried about what would happen to their pets. Almost one-third of the women in shelters reported their children had hurt or killed animals.

View slideshow: Youth Leaders at CACC (<http://www.examiner.com/slideshow/youth-leaders-at-cacc>)



(http://cdn2-b.examiner.com/sites/default/files/styles/large_lightbox/hash/3a/4f/3a4fef954c147e69da44a4dbef6fc702.jpg)

Two Youth Leaders for Safe Humane Chicago, LaDonna from Lindblom (left) and Naomi from Payton, are recognized for their service by the Chicago Police Department.

Photo credit: Safe Humane Chicago

Creating a new model

To help educate the next generation of families, **Safe Humane Chicago** (<http://www.safehumanechicago.org/>) has been working to teach high school and elementary students about treating animals with compassion through its **Youth Leaders Program** (<http://www.safehumanechicago.org/Youth-Leaders-for-Safe-Humane-Chicago>).

“This program trains high school students to speak on animal welfare issues and to become community leaders for making our neighborhoods safer and more humane,” says Kyla Page, Manager of Programs for **Safe Humane Chicago** (<http://www.examiner.com/topic/safe-humane-chicago/articles>). “The students serve both as mentors to their peers and role models for elementary students in neighborhoods most affected by violence and vulnerable to dog fighting and other forms of animal abuse. The Youth Leaders educate others on how to be safe around **dogs** (<http://www.examiner.com/dogs>) and why compassion toward animals is good, while driving home what is wrong with dog fighting and animal cruelty.”

Since the program's inception in 2008, the Safe Humane Chicago Youth Leaders program has trained approximately 150 students at



Video: [High School Youth Leaders take "humane" back to school](http://www.examiner.com/video/high-school-youth-leaders-take-humane-back-to-school) (<http://www.examiner.com/video/high-school-youth-leaders-take-humane-back-to-school>)

leader

Before new Youth Leaders visit elementary schools, they learn the presentation content. As part of their training, program volunteers bring their own, approved Safe Humane Ambassador Dogs both to increase the teens' comfort level around dogs and to train them how and when to approach an unfamiliar dog, read basic dog body language and what to do to keep oneself safe in the event of a loose, stray or attacking dog. The Youth Leaders also go on a field trip to [Chicago Animal Care and Control](http://www.examiner.com/topic/chicago-animal-care-and-control) (<http://www.examiner.com/topic/chicago-animal-care-and-control>) to learn important messages about pet population issues and remedies as well as animal abuse and to meet Safe Humane Chicago's Court Case Dogs ([see story \(http://www.examiner.com/pets-in-chicago/new-verdict-on-the-horizon-for-dogs-involved-criminal-cases\)](http://www.examiner.com/pets-in-chicago/new-verdict-on-the-horizon-for-dogs-involved-criminal-cases)).

When visiting elementary schools, the Youth Leaders start their presentation by splitting the class into smaller groups, to engage in interactive and meaningful discussions. The groups look at a variety of photos, ranging from free puppies in a box to dogs getting a bath, and community [cats](http://www.examiner.com/cats) (<http://www.examiner.com/cats>) in a car wheel well. Other photos reveal dogs with their ears cropped, wearing heavy chains, with no food, water or shelter. The students also show items like newspapers, shoes and chocolate bars. The goal is to prompt a discussion about proper care and treatment of animals.

The group comes together to practice how to react in the case of a loose or stray dog, and even a dog attack. It's important that, in neighborhoods where guard dogs and strays are common, children know how to keep themselves safe by "standing still like a statue" or getting "round like a rock."

Battling misconceptions

"One important message the Youth Leaders convey is why dog fighting is bad and what young children should do if they find themselves at a dog fight. This is a very challenging topic for a lot of people to talk about particularly because so many of these students have witnessed dog fights," says Page. "The Youth Leaders also work to combat myths associated with dogs forced to fight. For example, so many of these kids have been raised thinking that pit bull-type dogs are not only supposed to fight, but also they don't feel any pain."

Lindblom Math and Sciences Academy and Walter Payton College Prep. The Youth Leaders have reached 6,000 Chicago Public School elementary students, averaging 2,000 young students a year.

"The Youth Leaders are really bright kids and not all from the wealthiest neighborhoods," says Page, "It's really special when they go back into their own neighborhoods to present to the schools they attended. The kids just light up when the Youth Leaders come into their classes. The teens are admired and can reach younger kids in a way most humane education programs, and adult presenters, cannot."

Training new leaders

Positive connections

The highlight of the presentation for the elementary students is meeting a Safe Humane Ambassador Dog. For some, this is their first up-close, positive, safe experience with a dog. Volunteers bring their dogs, and each young student demonstrates what they learned about appropriately approaching and asking to pet a dog.

"It's amazing to see these high school students emerge as leaders in the classrooms and the community. They have real impact," says Page. "We had a group of teens about a year ago who wrote and performed a rap song as part of their presentation. Many of the Youth Leaders participate through all four years of high school and volunteer with Safe Humane in other capacities. Some have expressed interest in starting Safe Humane programs in their college communities. Many also volunteer at Chicago ACC events and have taken jobs at other pet-related businesses."

Changing attitudes

"One trend that we have seen since Safe Humane's programming inception is an increase in reports of animal abuse and dog fighting in our targeted neighborhoods," says Page. "More people are learning what is acceptable and what to do when they witness behavior that is wrong."

Page says Safe Humane is looking for additional sponsors and grants so the program may be expanded to reach more high schools. To learn more about the program, go [online](http://www.safehumanechicago.org/) (<http://www.safehumanechicago.org/>) or follow Safe Humane Chicago on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/SafeHumaneChicago) (<https://www.facebook.com/SafeHumaneChicago>) and [Twitter](https://twitter.com/%21/SHCourtCaseDogs) (<https://twitter.com/%21/SHCourtCaseDogs>). To donate to Safe Humane Chicago, please click [here](http://www.safehumanechicago.org/donate) (<http://www.safehumanechicago.org/donate>).

0

0

•

•

0

0

Print

Like

Tweet

Report



Kathy Mordini, Chicago Pets Examiner

Kathy Mordini is a public relations specialist and former journalist. She is passionate about educating the public on pet adoption, pet rescue and the many local pet businesses that support animal rescue. She has volunteered in the past as community outreach coordinator for Heartland Animal...