

MY TURN

Kids learn to aid all creatures via Breaking the Chain

By Debra J. White

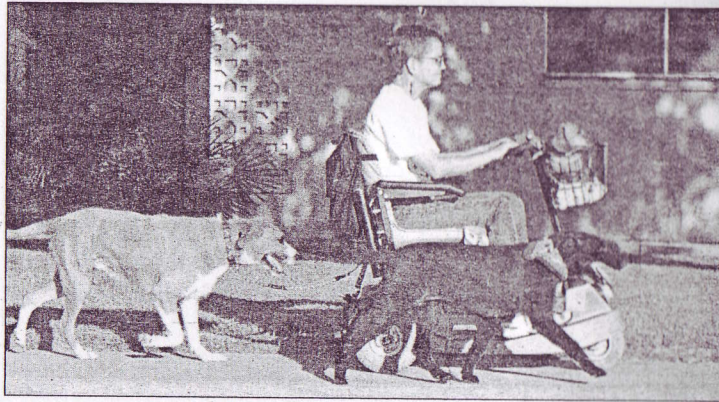
Breaking the Chain, an art and storytelling contest for third-grade children, recently celebrated its second year in the Phoenix and Mesa public schools.

The contest inspired children to find a solution for Joey, a chained dog, and how a neighbor's cat, the great Harriet, rescued him. Breaking the Chain channels positive messages to children about kindness and compassion, not just to animals but to people as well.

Children absorb violence at an early age, from television and video games to popular music. Extensive TV viewing alone does not cause violent behavior, but studies suggest it has an impact. Family and community behavior also shape childhood behavior.

Humane education benefits children by improving their outlook on society. Exposing children to humane education may nurture the next generation of compassionate, thoughtful leaders.

Pam Gaber, president and founder of Gabriel's Angels, a therapy dog group that focuses on abused, abandoned and at-risk children in the Phoenix area, said,



MARK HENLE/THE REPUBLIC

In this 2001 photograph, Tempe resident Debra J. White sets out one morning with her dogs Luke (left), Dottie (in basket) and Judy.

"Any time we teach a child humane treatment of animals we help develop a more compassionate child. How we treat and respect animals reflects on us as a society. Breaking the Chain teaches children the importance of animals in our lives and how to treat them with respect."

Researchers have inextricably linked animal abuse and violent behavior. In the late 1990s there was a horrific case of high school violence in Littleton, Colo. Both Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, who went on a shooting rampage before turning their guns on themselves, had bragged of muti-

lating animals. Serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer killed animals before murdering humans.

Breaking the Chain invited children to use their creative skills to free a dog from his chains. The contest taught children that animals experienced pain and suffering.

Although Joey is fictional, chained dogs live a miserable existence, suffering from exposure to blistering summers, frigid winters and thunderstorms. They often lack proper food and water. Chained dogs have no way to protect themselves from natural predators that inhabit certain

parts of the country.

Without human touch, dogs can become vicious. Chained dogs kill at least 50 children every year. Sometimes misguided teenage miscreants abuse chained dogs, further exacerbating their agony.

Breaking the Chain started in 2005 with two schools. This year's contest grew to 15. Several schools entered multiple classes.

This year's contest attracted support from Phoenix leaders such as Dr. Chris Risley-Curtiss, associate professor of social work at Arizona State University, who said, "Kindness to all living creatures often begins with kindness and understanding of those more vulnerable than us. Breaking the Chain is one step in teaching our children that kindness."

Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano added her endorsement with a special proclamation of the contest. So did Tammy Grimes, founder of Dogs Deserve Better, a national support group that advocates an end to chaining.

Hundreds of students entered poignant stories about Joey and how the great Harriet freed him from his chains. The top story, written by Myrna N., a 9-year-old girl who attends a school where English is usually not spoken at

home, grabbed the judges with her compassion toward animals and her creativity.

Here is an excerpt. "The sweet Harriet went to her house to find sparkling cold and icy water for poor and thirsty Joey. She went to give it to him. Joey finished but he was still thirsty. Harriet went to the police dog and she told him that someone isn't taking care of their dog. The police dog said we'll try to set Joey free and give him to a lovable and responsible person who will take awesome care of him. So the police took Joey away from the horrible owners. Two months later Harriet saw Joey with a girl walking him. Joey looked delighted. He looked well fed. He was with an awesome owner."

Breaking the Chain has carved a niche in the Phoenix and Mesa public school system. Not only does it teach empathy to animals, but some students wrote of compassion to each other. In a violent society, who can argue with that?

Breaking the Chain is a collaboration of the Arizona Animal Welfare League, the Pets 911 Auxiliary, It's a Ruff Life Dog Day Care, and Maddie's Fund.

Debra J. White of Tempe is an organizer of Breaking the Chain.