



## Roots & Shoots Educator Spotlight: Renée Gunther Middle School Teacher Bronx, New York



Dr. Jane often recalls a story about meeting a young man from the Bronx who, over the course of a year of involvement with Roots & Shoots, *leaped* out of his comfort zone to stand up for chimpanzees. We caught up with his teacher, Renée Gunther, who was an educator for more than 30 years and was awarded the Excellence in Education Award in 2011 at the Jane Goodall Global Leadership Awards.

### Can you tell us more about your class and the cereal box discovery?

Our service project came about after my class and I spent a morning surveying our community. One of the most striking observations was seeing the enormous school garbage containers filled with our lunchroom's used Styrofoam cups, bowls, plates, and food trays. I briefly explained why the production and disposal of polystyrene is considered unfriendly to our planet.

Toward the end of our excursion we came across trashcans with their contents spilled onto the sidewalk. An empty Cocoa Krispies cereal box caught our attention because it had a disturbing **picture of a chimp dressed**



**up in clothing.** The students' assignment for that evening was to review their observations, describe their likes and dislikes about the neighborhood, and find three disturbing factors we might be able to do something about. The following day, ideas were written on the board. After much discussion, the students voted to stop our school from using tons of harmful material in the lunchroom and petition Kellogg's to stop abusing animals by dressing them in clothing.

### **What changes did you observe in your students before and after the campaign?**

My middle school student population lived in a terribly low socio-economic area in the Bronx, New York. More than eighty percent of my students never had a life experience within a natural setting. For them, the world consisted of tenement buildings, concrete streets and sidewalks, smog, *trash*, sparse trees growing in a two square foot of soil, drug infested parks, pigeons, flies, cockroaches, rats, mice, gangs, and violence. Their apathy over environmental issues was apparent, understandable, and challenging. The majority believed there was nothing they could do even if they cared. It was clear that I needed to expose them to the beauty and serenity of the unfamiliar natural world and the amazing animals who survive in it. Various guest speakers, several excursions outside of the community, and instilling Dr. Goodall's motto regarding how each of us has the power to make a difference, caused the shift in attitude necessary for us to want to take action.

During and after our campaign, I observed astounding changes. Empowering and giving the students ownership of their project intrinsically stimulated much greater motivation, interest, and appreciation of nature. Expressing compassion was no longer a sign of weakness. The prospect of having the power to make a positive difference challenged several apathetic attitudes. Relating knowledge for a real life purpose resulted in a far greater engagement in learning. Problem solving activities necessary for making our projects successful taught actual decision making, communication (including listening to one another), and cooperation skills. We came to realize that each one of us has something important to offer. The relationship of classmates evolved into respected teammates. Actions necessary for our project made the work we were doing more visible within the educational community. Invitations led my students to confer with the school district's superintendent, plus speaking engagements at Fordham University, Bronx Community College, and two teacher workshops. My function was merely sitting in their audience, and quietly rejoicing in my students' greatly improved self-esteem.

### **What did it mean to you as an educator to witness those changes?**

Throughout my thirty plus years of teaching, I had never witnessed a program that had the impact in the classroom as Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots. The riches that came from my new role as a facilitator led to valuable changes to my methodology. My expectations, which have been considered as idealistic, were once again reinforced by reality. The experience reminded me of the incredible power we have in the classroom and that it is a huge responsibility and must be used cautiously and wisely.

### **What do you think the long-term impact of the project had on the Travis, the young man from Jane's story?**

Travis was one of my more challenging students with a history of terribly negative school experiences. His low self-esteem contributed to zero tolerance for frustration, causing him to throw books from his desk and refusing to do anything that entire day.

After discussing all possible class suggestions for our project, I saw an unfamiliar hand go up. Travis stood up and courageously gave reasons why we should stop Kellogg's from abusing animals by dressing them up. The votes were in and this was one of two campaigns elected. I can only imagine the impact it had when he realized the class listened and agreed with his persuasive communication. He worked tirelessly with his committee and even demonstrated leadership abilities. Travis discovered that he owned valuable attributes that were needed and respected by others. Experiencing pride in himself and positive self-esteem led to his decision to change past behaviors in the classroom. At the end of the school year, he was one of the students his peers selected to speak at a faculty workshop.

### **What does it mean to you to hear Dr. Jane tell your story after all this time?**

Dr. Jane is the person I admire and respect most in the world. It still amazes me how insightful she was about her program's influence on Travis. The honor I feel about Dr. Jane still remembering one of my students can best be described as the same feeling Travis must have experienced.

### **Anything else you would like to share?**

Today, I volunteer for the Jane Goodall Institute by introducing Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots to educators in Arizona. I consistently find that the instructors attracted to our program, like you, have exemplary qualities. It is with this knowledge that I want you to know how honored I am to be given the opportunity to share my experiences with you. You know good teaching is about passion as it is about reason. It is about not only motivating students to learn, but also teaching them how to learn, and doing so in a manner that is relevant and meaningful, and memorable. It's about caring for your craft,

having a passion for it, and conveying that passion to everyone, most importantly to their students. Your students are fortunate to have you as their teacher.