

Mountain Lines



by Lucy Muller (with Jeff, above; email Lucy at ern@warwick.net)

School is in again for another year, another generation, and another chance to teach and help the kids, "the best hope we've got." There are great teachers in the schools and there are also people in the community who have knowledge to share from their life experience. Together we can turn out some really good citizens.

Speaking for myself, I have experience working with animals and some humane education... I would like to share some memories of schools I went to in New Jersey.

The scene is a classroom in an elementary school. Twenty-five 5th graders face a screen. A movie about a girl and her dog is playing before them.

When the film ends, I walk to the front of the class and ask,

"Did you like the movie?"

"Yesss!" the class shouts back.

"Can anyone tell me the message of the movie?"

A hand goes up and the child is called on.

"I think the movie told us to be kind to animals and take care of them, because they can't take care of themselves."

"Very good," I say, "That is exactly what it said. The movie tells us that animals have feelings; they are not just toys to be played with and then tossed aside when they get old or boring."

(I think of telling them that we wouldn't do that to people, but, alas, how can I?)

In downtown Trenton, children sit in the school cafeteria listening to an animal welfare volunteer explain what to do if a strange dog comes near them.

"Stand very still and do not scream," I say. "Never, ever run. You can lie down on your stomach and cover your neck with your arms if the dog bites. Never pick up or touch a sick or dead animal. If you see one, tell a grownup or look in the telephone book under animal control and call the number. If someone you know has been bitten you should tell a policeman."

What the animal welfare group tries to get across to the children is to be careful, but not be cruel. Most bites come from teasing, so the children are asked to remember the golden rule – what would it feel like if someone threw something at you or hit you? We tell them that only ignorant people hurt animals and that just because some child or adult you know is cruel, doesn't mean you have to be. We think children are basically kind and love animals, but must be taught about their feelings.

One way to teach young children about caring for pets is to use a flannel board and some props. You can make "Sam," a flannel dog, his bowl, brush, leash, collar and tags, fence, tree, car, and toys.

The teacher tells the kids she would like them to help take care of Sam.

"What do you think a dog or a cat needs every day, just like you and I do?" she asks.

Some hands go up.

"A bone," says a child.

"No, not a real bone," says the teacher. "Maybe a toy bone, but what they really need is food, shelter, and water."

Then the teacher tells the children why a dog needs a collar and tag to show that he has been vaccinated; that he is loved, he needs to be kept warm and dry, and cool in the summer. The tree is to give shade. He needs a leash when he goes for a walk and hopefully a fenced yard. He needs a brush because it keeps his hair soft and it feels good. The felt car is used to tell them of the dangers of letting him run in the street.

Finally the teacher asks, "And what does he also need that you and I need?"

"Love and hugs," she says.

"Does anyone want to tell me a story about his or her pet?" I ask.

Hands wave frantically.

"My cat had seven kittens and we gave them away. I feed her every day. Her name is Angel," the girl says.

Once a three-year-old told me that her cat was orange and white and green.

There are more stories until the session ends

The over-population problem is not explained to small children, but explained to older groups.

We also do not talk about the atrocious conditions at the puppy mills in

Amish country in Pennsylvania or in the Midwest. The object is to teach compassion to the children; they will learn the rest soon enough.

The visits to schools were some of the most rewarding times I've had. You have to be prepared for some sad stories, but that comes with the territory. I just hope that some of the teachers in Ellenville will incorporate humane lessons into their ten months of incredible opportunity.

If you need an animal control officer in Ellenville, call the Village Clerk's office at **647-7080**; for Town of Wawarsing Clerk, **647-6560**.



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