

Students lead charge for beagle bill

Requires labs to offer dogs for adoption before being euthanized

By SAM STITES
Oregon Capital Bureau

In 2018, a group of Beaverton fifth graders navigated the intense and dramatic legislative session to help a few animals find good homes.

The idea came when teacher Courtney Yeager of Beaverton's Elmonica Elementary was in the middle of teaching a unit on the United Nations' global goals. Students chose to work on goal 15, which has to do with protecting the earth and animals.

As part of the unit, Yeager participated in a program called Skype in the Classroom to introduce her students to Shannon Keith, of the Beagle Freedom Project in Valley Village, California. The nonprofit advocates for the release of animals — particularly beagles selected because of their docile nature — used in research labs when they're done and the animals are healthy enough to potentially live a second life.

They learned about animal testing of health and beauty products, and the effects it can have on the dogs. Students learned that a majority of the research animals are forced to live all their lives indoors with no sunlight, in small cages. They also learned that many of these animals could be given a second chance if they were adopted by loving families.

Students were gung-ho to jumping into the fray. They wanted to be part of Keith's organization and fight for legislation in several states to protect animals from euthanasia once laboratories were done with them. The effort became their end-of-year project in Yeager's class.

"It was truly amazing," Keith said. "I thought, this will be really cool if this class of kids can get this bill started in Oregon. It speaks volumes to what children are capable of."

Going all in on legislation

The students took the basic framework of the bill Beagle Freedom Project that was passed in nine other states and applied it to Oregon law. The result was Senate Bill 638.

According to Kelly Peterson, state affairs director for the Oregon Humane Society, federal law only regulates the care and use of research animals while they're in a lab. It doesn't provide protection to animals once the research is finished, other than mandating euthanasia.

The law is critical because it creates a relationship between labs and nonprofit animal shelters. Cats and dogs used in research must be evaluated and if they're found healthy enough, they're given to local shelters to be put up for adoption. The new law also requires labs throughout Oregon to report the numbers of animals they have to the secretary of state's office at the



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Beagles, like these rescued from Wisconsin, have been used for animal testing in labs across the nation. A new law taking effect Wednesday requires the labs to offer animals for adoption before they are euthanized.

end of each year.

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture numbers, in 2017 27 cats and 26 dogs were used in research at Oregon labs.

To aid in their effort, the Beaverton students reached out to state Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, a Beaverton Democrat, who was just as excited as the young activists about the prospect of the proposed legislation.

Steiner Hayward's relationship with Elmonica Elementary goes back a few years when she helped a fourth grade class scoop ice cream at a local Baskin-Robbins to raise money in support of homeless students. She's returned to the school to give speeches at assemblies and talk to students about topics they're passionate about. When Steiner Hayward got a call from Yeager's class about an extracurricular project to protect animal rights, she was all in.

"Every person in elected office, it's our dream to see young people engaged in this way. There's nothing that makes me happier than seeing motivated young people engage in the political process one way or another," Steiner Hayward said.

Many people were supportive of the bill, including those in the statehouse and local organizations that agreed with its message including the Oregon Humane Society. Despite the support, she said, it still required a good effort to get it passed.

"It took a lot of work to negotiate some parts of it, but we got to a good place and the kids were terrific. Everybody really loved the bill," she said.

'If you were in their shoes'

By everybody, Steiner Hayward really means everybody. After hearing public testimony from Yeager and a few of her students in March, the bill was carried unanimously in both chambers. The law takes effect with the new year on Wednesday, and the students involved will be part of a Jan. 13 ceremonial signing of the bill at the State Capitol in Salem.

Two of those that gave testimony were Ethan Park and Dakota Wright, now sixth graders in Beaverton schools. Park and Wright stood in front of a legislative body that wasn't particularly affable and were able to per-

sue them to act.

"Like us, animals only have one life, and it shouldn't be spent in a cage," Wright told lawmakers. "Every dog deserves the chance to meet their best friend."

"If you were in their shoes," Park asked, "would you want to be used and then discarded? Or have a chance at your life?"

Sharon Harmon, Oregon Humane Society president and chief executive officer, said she's proud of the work done by these young activists to push for something they're

passionate about, effectively allowing these animals to retire with new families once they've done their service. "We all win when we look at animals as sentient beings. This certainly is a bright spot in the world today to know these kids are looking outside themselves and looking to those who don't have a voice to make sure they're safe and protected," Harmon said.

Steiner Hayward agreed with Harmon and hopes that is a lesson seen by Oregonians, both young and old,

searching for a way to take something they're passionate about and turn into action.

"People in policymaking positions really do listen to (your) voices and want to hear what's important to them and how they can make a difference in the world around them because they see things we don't, and they have the opportunity to dig in on issues we don't," she said.

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