AN INTERVIEW WITH
JENIFER GRAHAM
FOLLOWING YOUR
CONSCIENCE IN
THE CLASSROOM

Jennifer Graham's name may not be a household word, but her refusal to dissect a frog in a high school biology class in 1987 because of her moral beliefs was reported in dozens of newspapers across the country. For more than a year, Jennifer, with support from The HSUS and our attorneys, resisted efforts by the Victor Valley (California) district school board to require her to dissect or accept a lowered biology grade and a negative evaluation on her school transcript.

Jennifer attended the 1988 HSUS annual conference in October to participate in a workshop on alternatives to dissection and receive a special award. At that time, Dr. Randall Lockwood, HSUS director of higher education programs, had an opportunity to talk to Jennifer about the events of the past months.

Lockwood: You obviously have a strong commitment to animals to have gone through all the pressures of the last year. Where do you think these feelings came from?

Graham: I've always loved animals. I grew up in a caring family. I have a dog we rescued from the desert, a mixture of all kinds of breeds, and two turtles and three tanks of fish. I learned a lot from my mom, but my refusal to dissect was all my own decision.

Lockwood: How would you describe your basic philosophy about animals?

Graham: I see animals as being as close to me as my friends and family. They just happen to have very different kinds of bodies, but we are all related by being alive.

Lockwood: Were there any particular events that helped shape your interest in helping animals?

Graham: Once, when I was about four, I found a baby bird that had fallen out of a tree. I was starting to pick it up with a plastic bag so it wouldn't get my scent and some bullies came along and stomped on it. That really hurt me.

When I was older, my mom took me to a rodeo and all I could think about was what the animals were feeling. It didn't seem right to me.

Lockwood: What people have inspired you the most?

Graham: I really admire Jane Goodall for all her studies, and she seems so warm, yet so strong.
Jenifer Graham: The HSUS got me a tutor. He made sure that all of the alternatives I used met the California requirements. The things that made the biggest impression on me, that were the most fun, were the ones dealing with plants and live animals.

The school board complained that I wouldn’t get hands-on experience, so I used tools like a scalpel and probe to dissect plants and fruits of all different kinds, like mushrooms and palm roots. I did an earthworm lab where I watched their behavior in different kinds of soil.

For the frog, I got my tutor’s frog for about a week. I watched his movements. I observed how he swam in a tub and really got to see his personality! To learn the insides, I used a very detailed model and transparencies and the computer program and did a lot of reading.
Miss Graham explains to Dr. Randall Lockwood of The HSUS her refusal to dissect a frog in a high school biology class.

Lockwood: How did the other students react as word got around about your refusal?
Graham: I had support from my friends, but there were people who didn't know the whole story, who just thought I was squeamish. But no one else was willing to risk his grade by refusing to dissect.

Lockwood: What about the other teachers?
Graham: My history teacher was really supportive. He used my case to make a point about the importance of the Constitution and freedom of religious belief.

Lockwood: As word about you spread, what kind of reaction did you get from other students around the country?
Graham: I got tons of letters! The school would call me down to the office every day to pick up my mail. Sometimes there would be twenty letters, sometimes a hundred! I tried to answer them all at first, but then it got to be too much.

Lockwood: What kinds of reactions were you getting?
Graham: All of them were supportive except two. One said, "If you feel that way about frogs, I hope you're a vegetarian (which, of course, I am) because they kill animals for food, too!" Then, there was one from someone with the California Biomedical Research Association lecturing me about the need for animals in research. They got [even with] me on the Apple ad, though [by pressuring the computer company to remove an ad featuring Jenifer from distribution—see sidebar].

Lockwood: How did Apple Computer justify pulling the commercial that featured you promoting computerized alternatives?
Graham: They said that people were concentrating too much on the frogs and me and not the computers, but I think they knuckled under to pressure. The funny thing is that my school is getting a computer lab for the English classes and they’re getting all Apples. Even the phys. ed. department is buying them. That made me happy!

Lockwood: Your testimony in the California state legislature was very helpful in getting the bill passed that helps make dissection optional in that state. How did that make you feel?
Graham: It was great. Everyone listened to me—I couldn't believe it! I was glad I had a chance to go to the capitol.

Lockwood: What were the toughest times for you in all of this?
Graham: I was really nervous starting a new school six weeks before all this really started. I didn't know anybody, I didn't have a boyfriend, I didn't know how teachers would react to me. Even though most of the students were on my side, no one else was willing to take the risks. Then it was embarrassing dealing with the school's lawyers. They kept asking what I had eaten over the last few days, to make sure I was a vegetarian. They wanted me to show them all my makeup to make sure it really was cruelty-free, stuff like that!

Lockwood: What are your plans now?
Graham: I'll still graduate. I have a passing average. I have to take the SAT tests and I want to go on to college. I want to do science and I want to work with animals, probably studying animal behavior. I'm really interested in oceanography.

Lockwood: What would be your advice to other students who find themselves in your situation?
Graham: Don't be afraid. Stand up for what you feel. Too many people hold back!

Lockwood: Having seen what happened, would you go through this again if you had to?
Graham: Absolutely!