



The 2014 National Kind Teacher of the Year, Jessica Sears hugs Niko, one of her three adopted terriers.

JESSICA SEARS ELMER, NEW JERSEY

United Passions

An animal advocate for as long as she can remember, teacher Jessica Sears says it is a joy to combine her passion for education with her commitment to animals. “[Incorporating] humane education into my classroom is kind of a reflection of who I am outside the classroom as well. It’s something ... very dear to my heart.”

Still Reaching

Exciting things continue to happen for animals thanks to Project R.E.A.C.H. students, who recently created a large mural at the Salem County Humane Society and drafted public service announcements to encourage people to adopt shelter pets. At projectreach2013.blogspot.com, Sears chronicles the many ways her students help animals in the community.

About the Award

The award—now called the National Humane Teacher of the Year—recognizes pre-K-12 teachers who effectively incorporate humane education into their curriculums. To nominate yourself or another teacher for the 2015 award, visit humanesociety.org/humaneteacher (the deadline for nominations is Feb. 15).

WITHIN REACH

NEW JERSEY EDUCATOR GETS
HIGH MARKS IN HUMANE EDUCATION
// BY CATHERINE VINCENTI

IT STARTED as a simple language arts lesson—students using an online program to categorize a series of nouns as people, places or things. But when the program indicated that the word “kitten” should be categorized as a thing, 15-year-old Laquan and 14-year-old Kevin strongly objected. So strongly, in fact, that they posted their concern on Facebook.

“When we hear people refer to animals as ‘things,’ it is upsetting because we know that it isn’t true,” they wrote.

For teacher Jessica Sears, their outrage was validation that her humane messaging was sinking in.

Currently in her fifth year of teaching, Sears believes that humane education should be provided throughout a child’s schooling. But in her experience, these lessons tend to fade or disappear from the curriculum in middle and high school.

The lack of humane messaging for her grade 7-12 students at Daretown School in Elmer, New Jersey, inspired the bubbly educator to create

Project R.E.A.C.H. (Research-Educate-Act-Create-Help), in which students raise awareness about animal cruelty and help local shelters.

Sears’ class is a mix of special education students who often come to school feeling insecure and reluctant to try new things. But with Sears’ guidance, the youngsters eagerly participate in R.E.A.C.H. and regularly ask to do more.

“My students need humane messaging just as much if not more [than younger students] because of situations that they may be exposed to,” she says. “They need to be able to differentiate what’s right and what’s wrong.”

Through Project R.E.A.C.H., students conduct research and use social media and other technology to educate others about animal issues. They create fliers and banners that encourage shelter adoptions and organize collection drives and fundraisers. Even practicing reading skills becomes fun when students sit in a shelter’s cat room and read to a furry audience.

Named the 2014 National Kind Teacher of the Year by The HSUS, Sears hopes that other educators will start similar programs. “If you’re willing to reach out and share ideas and communicate those ideas in positive ways, we really can be a voice—a very strong voice.”