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'Speak up for animals';
Anti-cruelty campaign offers lesson for students

By JAN BARRY, STAFF WRITER, North Jersey Media Group

WANAQUE — Bruce Zeman Jr. is on a mission.

The happy companion of a dachshund named Nathan, Zeman wants to end cruelty to animals.

Two years ago, he persuaded the Borough Council to adopt an ordinance — "Nathan's Law" — changing references in local codes from animal owner to animal guardian. A number of towns across the country and the state of Rhode Island have adopted similar laws, which add a measure of human responsibility for animal welfare to older laws that viewed animals as property.

Last year, Zeman took his passion as an animal rescuer to New Orleans to help find pets stranded by Hurricane Katrina floodwaters.

Now, with Nathan cocking his fluffy ears, Zeman is helping launch a humane education curriculum at his neighborhood school.

"You guys have to speak up for the animals," Zeman, 36, told seventh-graders at Wanaque Elementary School on Wednesday. All eyes were on Nathan, who was being cuddled by Zeman's wife, Jillayne. "You are the ones who are going to make a difference for them."

Zeman told the students he is a Board of Education member promoting a new program to teach compassion for animals. He noted that this issue is so important to him that he took a day off from work — as a purchasing director for a swimming pool manufacturer — to speak to several classes.

"Wanaque is going to be a national model on how to treat animals. Everyone here can be part of it," Zeman said. "Your activities are going to determine what happens to animals like Nathan."

He also noted that youths who have gone on murderous rampages were often known to have abused animals.

"We don't want that to happen again," he said.

Zeman is not just relying on the children of Wanaque. He also enlisted the support of parents such as Sue Klein, Principal John Murrin and other animal advocates in the region, such as the Bloomingdale Animal Shelter Society.

Murrin said he sees a lot of value in adding sessions on treating animals humanely to the school curriculum.

"This is a fabulous activity," the principal said. "It's a win-win for everybody — the animals, the kids, the school. It's one thing kids will love to do. Eighth-graders were asking why they weren't included. We had to start somewhere. Next year, we're going to get them all involved."

Klein said her son, Jacob, a seventh-grader at the Wanaque school, got excited about helping animal shelters by collecting food and other items from fellow students.

Jacob also helped Zeman make his point, citing the "Pet's Bill of Rights" from an animal rights' Web site.

Zeman's bottom-line message is that people of all ages should speak up if they see someone abusing an animal.

Hands shot in the air when Zeman asked for questions and comments.

"If you see someone abuse an animal, what would you do?" asked Amanda Tornese, an 11-year-old sixth-grader.

"I'd call the police," Zeman said.

During a previous session for seventh-graders, Zeman said "If it was up to me, we'd have mandatory jail terms for people who abuse animals."

Seventh-grader Alex Wasilewski said he found the session very interesting.

"I learned a lot of things," he said. "I learned there are a number of things we can do."

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Fast facts

* Wanaque Elementary School is launching a humane education program to teach compassion for animals.

* The program was inspired by the Guardian Campaign, which promotes changes in laws and public education to provide rights and protection to pets and other animals.

For more information: guardiancampaign.org