TEENS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

BY MARGUERITE MARSH

Video games, iPods, cell phones, texting, TV watching, bad behavior—that's the profile that some people attribute to today's teens. Some fit that stereotype, but most don't.

The problem is that good behavior doesn't always get the press that bad behavior does. Take a look at some teens making a difference. It may change the way you look at kids 18 and under.

Mimi Ausland

Not many people, let alone teens or tweens, can say that they started a website to feed hungry companion animals at a local shelter. But Mimi Ausland, a 12-year-old from Bend, Oregon, who volunteered at the shelter, can say she did—successfully.

Ausland first got the idea from the Free Rice site, where every question you answer correctly donates 10 grains of rice to the World Food Program to help end hunger. Instead of rice, she selected kibble for cats and dogs. Every day two questions are posted—one about cats and one about dogs. When you answer, correctly or incorrectly, you donate 10 pieces of kibble to each animal.

According to her website, Ausland launched freekibble on April 1, 2008. By May 14, she had collected 240 pounds of food, which she delivered to her local shelter, the Humane Society of Central Oregon.

Her first donation was enough to feed 456 dogs for one day. As of January 4, 2010, freekibble and freekibblekat, have raised over 285,000 pounds (142 tons) of kibble to be shared among 13 shelters across the U.S. It's no wonder she was a 2008 ASPCA Humane Award Winner for her efforts.

Sally O'Brien

As an 18-year-old senior at Upper Arlington High School, Sally O'Brien has a busy schedule. She takes classes, tutors other students, is the copy editor for her high school yearbook and design editor for the school's literary arts magazine. She also works three days a week in a local restaurant. But that doesn't stop her from volunteering at school and in the community. "Volunteering is a two-way street," O'Brien explained. "No matter how much I give, I get something in return."

Her list of volunteer projects is extensive—at school she is involved with school musicals, Peer Collaboration, Respect Yourself, and the Honor Flight Club, and is a camp counselor for sixth graders at Big Brothers Big Sisters' Camp Oty'Okwa. She volunteers every summer at Upper Arlington's Safety Town, just as she has done since sixth grade—working with children ages 5 and 6. "I've worked in the office, been a teacher's assistant and an outside supervisor," said O'Brien. "I've learned so much. They've taught me as much as I've taught them. I'm better at working with people. I see things from their point of view. I've learned not to take things so seriously and the importance of going out and helping people."

She and her friends also help walk dogs at the Capital Area Humane Society. "We can walk

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dogs and hang out together," O'Brien said. Her involvement with dogs doesn't end there. She and her family have been raising puppies for Pilot Dogs since 2001. They've raised seven puppies so far—keeping each for a year. "We all help out in watching, socializing and training," she said. "My parents played a big role in this. They have taught me that I have the resources to go out and help people and influence the community. I have the time. And I still have time to hang out with my friends. I can still do what I want to do, so why not?"

Erin O'Brien

Erin O'Brien is a 16-year-old junior at Upper Arlington High School and is Sally's sister. Erin also is community-oriented and involved in many of the same organizations as Sally, but also marches to her own drummer. Erin has donated her hair to Locks of Love—to donate, hair must be 10 inches long or longer. "I've always hated getting my hair cut," O'Brien said. "When I was 11 years old it was down to my hips. I've done it three times and I plan to keep doing it."

She also is a part of the Link Crew at school, helping the freshmen adjust to being in high school, has directed the local middle school's annual musical, is involved in Respect Yourself and has been a camp counselor for sixth graders at Camp Oty'Okwa. "The whole sixth grade goes," O'Brien said. "The whole goal is to be positive role models. They may not know how to act in a new environment. We share the entire camp experience." She's learned from the campers, too, she said. "They've taught me the value of looking at someone else's perspective. And to just let go and have fun."

Since the sixth grade, O'Brien has spent her summers at Safety Town. Currently she's a teacher's aide, helping kids with crafts and teaching them songs. She also teaches traffic safety and how to be a safe pedestrian. And what has she learned? "I've developed new people skills and communication skills interacting with kids, their parents and the officers. It's getting me ready for an adult job and the interviews." O'Brien's goal is to study communications and maybe work in public relations. "I enjoy working with a lot of people," she said. "Safety Town has probably helped me realize that."

O'Brien's advice for teens who wish to volunteer but can't decide what to do is to try the Humane Society. "It's very popular. It's easy to clean up cages and walk dogs. Find your talents and your skill to make a difference. Figure out what you are good at and what you enjoy. Do you like sports? How about the Special Olympics? Helping kids? Find a school that can use your help. There's something for all kinds of interests."

Eryn Dalton Powell

Winner of a Columbus 2009 Jefferson Award for public service, and creator of Eryn's Healing Arts website, Eryn Dalton Powell has a lot of life knowledge at age 14. Diagnosed with sickle cell anemia (SCA) at a young age, Powell has spent plenty of time at Nationwide Children's Hospital. The idea for her first toy drive was born when she was hospitalized while receiving treatment for SCA. "It can be pretty painful," she said.

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"The blood cells get clogged in the veins. I tried to distract myself from the pain—I did some drawings and made some cards."

The gift cart that offers patients arts and crafts, toys, notebooks and stuffed animals, was a help. "People donate the items," she said. "It made me feel better that someone was thinking about me."

Powell started her toy drive with her classmates, who were excited about helping out. Her first drive was such a success that she's made it an annual event, even getting help from the Chicago Symphony and teachers at her school.

The idea for her website came when her mother noticed her drawings and made cards from them. Powell now sells the cards on her site as a fundraiser. Her goal? To help and educate others with SCA.

"A lot of people don't even know they have the disease. A 16-year-old had a stroke and then she was diagnosed." She also just wants to help others. "If someone else could feel better about anything—I want to do something to help them. Helping other people makes me happy. I just love it."

Powell has other plans for her website—like creating a calendar from the photos she loves to take. But they will have to wait. Because of SCA, she missed a lot of school this year and has a lot of homework to catch up on. But that won't keep her down. "I like the feel of accomplishment," she said. "But at the same time, I still feel like I can still do more. I'm really, really happy, but I know I can keep on going."

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