



Kasey Martini gives a kitten a better view of things during a Rescue U project in Braxton County, W.Va.

The Kids Are All Right

Rescue U connects college students to shelters in need

JAMES HETTINGER

It's an age-old story: Older folks are always dissing younger folks.

Cavemen probably lamented that the neighborhood youngsters lacked the gumption to hunt and gather like their elders.

Socrates, in a remarkably modern-sounding rant, railed against children's bad manners, contempt for authority, disrespect for their parents, and love of chatter. (And, last time we checked, there were no cell phones in 400 B.C.)

Responsible adults have been horrified by the rabid young fans of everyone from Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley to Britney Spears and

Lady Gaga—and more than once they've predicted an imminent cultural collapse.

What's a kid gotta do to earn some respect?

Two words (well, almost): Rescue U. The program's youthful participants have found a way to prove their mettle and defy the skeptics—one animal shelter at a time.

Founded in 2006 as an outreach program of Animal Lifeline (a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit that funnels food and supplies to needy shelters and rescues), Rescue U sends college students from around the country to do repairs and construction work at shelters that

have requested help. The work ranges from patching chain-link fences to substantially rebuilding shelters. The students volunteer their time, don't get any college credit, and usually give up vacation days to participate in Rescue U projects, which take seven to 10 days.

"It's so funny. People always like to say, 'The kids of this generation, they scare the heck out of me. They seem so lazy,'" says Bryna Donnelly, a Rescue U program manager. "... But you show them the way, and they do amazing things. We've got little 90-pound girls that we teach to weld that just eat it up."

A Little Elbow Grease

"I think the younger generation kind of gets beat on a lot by the older generation," adds Courtney Dickinson, a senior biology major and president of the Delaware Valley College chapter of Rescue U in Doylestown, Pa. "But there are a lot of college kids out there who really do want to make a difference, really do want to help."

Rescue U started small and has grown quickly. Donnelly, a college science professor, was doing construction work at a shelter in West Virginia through Animal Lifeline, which was founded by her friend Denise Bash. Some of Donnelly's students heard what she was up to and wanted to get involved. Donnelly says she and Bash "dragged the college students into it, and Rescue U was born."

For their first big trip, a vanload of about a dozen Rescue U volunteers traveled to South Carolina with \$3,000. They camped out in the middle of March in the pouring rain, ate peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches, did all their work with adjustable wrenches—and were able to put every penny into the shelter, Donnelly recalls.

As Rescue U did more trips, the tech-savvy young people posted videos online about their work and got busy in social media, greatly raising the group's visibility, Donnelly says. Local people heard about Rescue U and donated tools or supermarket



Rescue U program manager Bryna Donnelly cradles a beagle during a trip to Richie County, W.Va. The program gives students a chance to do "amazing things," Donnelly says.

gift cards, allowing the volunteers' diet to expand beyond peanut butter and jelly.

The group attracted more monetary donations and corporate sponsors, including the Petfinder.com Foundation (which bought Rescue U in August and hired Donnelly to continue running it). The Animal Rescue Site (a Petfinder.com partner that collects donations from the public and distributes them to charities) donated \$75,000 for a January 2012 trip to Oklahoma to rebuild a shelter destroyed by a tornado. Last May, the Petfinder.com Foundation won a \$400,000 Chase Community Giving award following a vote on Facebook; Donnelly says that grant's purpose was to take Rescue U to the national level, and it enabled her to stop teaching full time.

By late 2011, Rescue U had completed about 23 shelter projects involving more than 125 volunteers. College students make up the bulk of the work force, but Donnelly says the program has also attracted parents, Eagle scouts, and returning college graduates and their siblings. Rescue U tries to recruit students from local colleges near the shelters receiving the work. "And usually once they do it once, they're hooked," she says. "They just love it."

Hooked on Helping

Dickinson, who has gone on a half dozen Rescue U trips, counts herself among those who have gotten hooked—despite the fact that she had previously never even set foot in an animal shelter.

On a trip to West Virginia, she found the number of dogs coming into one shelter "absolutely shocking." In South Carolina, Dickinson recalls that a local man making a food donation to the shelter approached the group of volunteers who were building animal beds, and told them he could hardly express how much their work meant to the shelter and the community.

The fellowship among the students is another attraction. "The people that I've met on these trips, they've become my best friends," Dickinson adds. "... It's like a second family."

In the four years she's been involved, Dickinson has seen the scope of Rescue U projects expand. On her first trip the students repaired a couple of fences; more recently they built an entire cat shelter. And when



Rescue U volunteer Matt Murrin helps put it all together during a project in Morehead, Ky. Since its founding in 2006, Rescue U has completed about two dozen construction and repair jobs.

they do repair fences, she adds, they now get much higher-quality chain link.

Last August, students descended on the Cameron County SPCA, a nonprofit with nine dog kennels in rural Emporium, Pa., and vice president Lisa Collins could hardly have been more impressed. The volunteers laid cement, did drywall work, put up fences for play pens, installed light fixtures, and painted—working from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. some days, Collins says.

"They never once interrupted anything at our kennel," she says. "They were very organized. They come in there, and they knew what they wanted to do, and they got it done. We kept asking them, 'What can we do? What can we do?' And they're like, 'Nothing. Just stand back and watch.' They were wonderful."

Despite its growth, Rescue U is determined to keep its grass-roots approach to deliver the maximum benefit to shelters, Donnelly says. Student volunteers were planning to drive rather than fly from Pennsylvania to Oklahoma in January, for example, and they camp out when the weather permits.

Rescue U's goals include getting another 20 colleges involved by the end of 2012, and to be in all the continental states by the end of 2015. Donnelly says, "We'd like to be Habitat for Humanity for animals." **AS**

For more information on Rescue U, go to RescueU.org. To view a video about Rescue U, go to bit.ly/zp00k1.