



Roots & Shoots Educator Spotlight: Renée Gunther Middle School Teacher Bronx, New York



Dr. Jane often recalls a story about meeting a young man from the Bronx who, over the course of a year of involvement with Roots & Shoots, *leaped* out of his troubled comfort zone and became a leader amongst his peers. We caught up with his teacher, Renée Gunther, who was an educator for more than 30 years and was awarded the Excellence in Education Award at the 2011 Jane Goodall Global Leadership Awards.

Can you tell us more about your class and their cereal box discovery?

Our service project came about after my class and I spent a morning surveying our community. Toward the end of our excursion we came across trashcans with their contents spilled onto the sidewalk. An empty Cocoa Krispies cereal box caught our attention because it had a disturbing **picture of a chimp dressed up in clothing**. The students' assignment for that evening was to review their observations, describe their likes and dislikes about the neighborhood, and find three disturbing factors we might be able to do something about. The following day, ideas were written on the board. After much discussion, the students voted to stop our school from using harmful material in the lunchroom and petition Kellogg's to stop abusing animals by dressing them in clothing.



What changes did you observe in your students before and after participation in Roots & Shoots?

My middle school student population lived in a terribly low socio-economic area in the Bronx, New York. More than eighty percent of my students never had a life experience within a natural setting.

During and after our campaign, I observed astounding changes. Empowering and giving the students ownership of their project intrinsically stimulated much greater motivation, interest, and appreciation of nature. We came to realize that each one of us has something important to offer. The relationship of classmates evolved into respected teammates. Actions necessary for our project made the work we were doing more visible within the educational community. Invitations led my students to confer with the school district's superintendent, plus speaking engagements at Fordham University, Bronx Community College, and two teacher workshops.

What did it mean to you as an educator to witness those changes?

Throughout my thirty plus years of teaching, I have never witnessed a program that has had a bigger impact on youth than Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots. The riches that came from my new role as a facilitator led to valuable changes to my methodology. My expectations, which have been considered as idealistic, were once again reinforced by reality. The experience reminded me of the incredible power we have in the classroom and that it is a huge responsibility and must be used cautiously and wisely.

What do you think the long-term impact of the project had on the Travis, the young man from Jane's story?

Travis was one of my more challenging students with a history of terribly negative school experiences. His low self-esteem contributed to zero tolerance for frustration, causing him to throw books from his desk and refusing to do anything that entire day.

After discussing all possible class suggestions for our project, I saw an unfamiliar hand go up. Travis stood up and courageously gave reasons why we should stop Kellogg's from abusing animals by dressing them up. The votes were in and this was one of two campaigns elected. I can only imagine the impact it had when he realized the class listened and agreed with his persuasive communication. He worked tirelessly with his committee and even demonstrated leadership abilities. Travis discovered that he owned valuable attributes that were needed and respected by others. Experiencing pride in himself and positive self-esteem led to his decision to change past behaviors in the classroom. At the end of the school year, he was one of the students his peers selected to speak at a faculty workshop.