THE

# Latham Letter

VOLUME XLVII, NUMBER 4 Fall 2026

PROMOTING RESPECT FOR ALL LIFE THROUGH EDUCATION



## CHANGEMAKERS


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MANDATE

# Edith Latham's **MANDATE:**

"To promote, foster, encourage and further the principles of humaneness, kindness and benevolence to all living creatures."







Brother Buzz, star of Latham's Brother Buzz films and our former Spokesbee, marks the end of articles.


**The Latham Letter**
Balanced perspectives on humane issues and activities

Search the Latham Letter archives by topic and learn more about all of our resources and grants at www.Latham.org or call 510-521-0920.

The Latham Foundation for the Promotion of Humane Education


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# The Latham Letter

Volume XLVII, Number 4, Fall 2026

**BALANCED PERSPECTIVES ON HUMANE ISSUES AND ACTIVITIES**

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The Latham Foundation is a 501(c)(3) private operating foundation founded in 1918 to promote respect for all life through education. Latham welcomes partnerships with other institutions and individuals who share its commitment to furthering humane education.

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Stacey Zeitlin, President
The Latham Foundation



# Making Room For Change

Fall has a way of reminding us that change is part of life. The days grow shorter, familiar routines resume, and a new school year brings opportunities to learn—not just for students, but for all of us.

In humane education, we spend a great deal of time thinking about change. How do we help someone see an animal's needs more clearly? How do we turn concern into action? And how do we know when a lesson has made a difference?

The stories in this issue offer some thoughtful answers.

In the Youth Changemaker Clubs supported by LivingKind, students aren't simply learning about problems. They are choosing issues that matter to them and taking steps to help. Their work reminds us that young people need more than encouragement to care; they need opportunities to put that caring into practice. Sometimes our role as educators is to offer guidance. Sometimes it is to step back and make room for their ideas.

The Rhode Island SPCA's Paws to Learn program offers another kind of opportunity: a chance for teens to connect with animals, learn about their care, and contribute to their well-being. These experiences bring humane education beyond the classroom and into relationships where kindness has a practical purpose.

A new school year also invites us to reconsider familiar practices. Our partners at the National Anti-Vivisection Society encourage students, parents, and educators to do just that by exploring ways of learning that do not require harming animals. Asking whether something can be done differently is often the first step toward meaningful change.




The Latham Foundation steps in humane education

And then there are the changes we do not choose. In "Blue's Final Gift," a student's relationship with a therapy horse becomes a story of connection, loss, and learning to grieve. It is a moving reminder that the bonds we form with animals can continue to shape us even after we say goodbye.

These stories are different, but each makes room for something new: a student's idea, a different approach to teaching, a deeper understanding of another living being.

As we move into fall, I hope this issue offers both encouragement and an invitation to notice those possibilities in your own work and community. We may not see the full effect of every lesson or act of kindness. But we can keep creating opportunities for compassion to grow—and trust that those opportunities matter.

*In addition to serving as President for The Latham Foundation, Stacey Zeitlin is the Vice President of Community Impact at San Diego Humane Society and serves as a board advisor to the Association of Professional Humane Educators.*




# Latham Grants For 2026

Each year the Latham Foundation awards grants to organizations providing innovative humane education programs to their communities. This year the focus was on programs with Service Learning.

While we always receive more applications than we can provide funding for, the following were recognized for their impactful humane education programs benefiting both humans and animals.

Thanks to all applicants for their submissions and for the important work they do.

*https://www.latham.org/2026/09/latham-foundation-2026-grant-awards/*

Animal Protection New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM

Animal Friends, Inc.
Wildomar, CA

Appalachian Wildlife Refuge
Candler, NC

Austin Pets Alive!, Austin, TX

Bit-by-Bit, Inc., Davie, FL

Central Florida Zoological Society, Inc., Sanford, FL

Charleston Animal Society
North Charleston, SC

Darlington County Humane Society, Hartsville, SC

EcoVivarium, Escondido, CA

Fredericksburg SPCA
Fredericksburg, VA

Harmony Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, Nashville, TN

Hinsdale Humane Society
Hinsdale, IL

Hope Haven Farm Sanctuary, Inc., Sewickley, PA

Lynchburg Humane Society
Lynchburg, VA

MARYS House, Pickens, SC

Nashville Cat Rescue,
Nashville, TN

National Anti-Vivisection Society, Chicago, IL

Oceanside Ivey Ranch Park Association, Oceanside, CA

Oreo's Haven, Stockton, CA

Pet Helpers, Charleston, SC

Ruthless Kindness
Sebastopol, CA

Shepard Meadows Equestrian Center, Bristol, CT

Sierra Overlook Animal Rescue, Diamond Springs, CA

Snake River Animal Shelter
Idaho Falls, ID

Solid Rock Community School
Tarpon Springs, FL

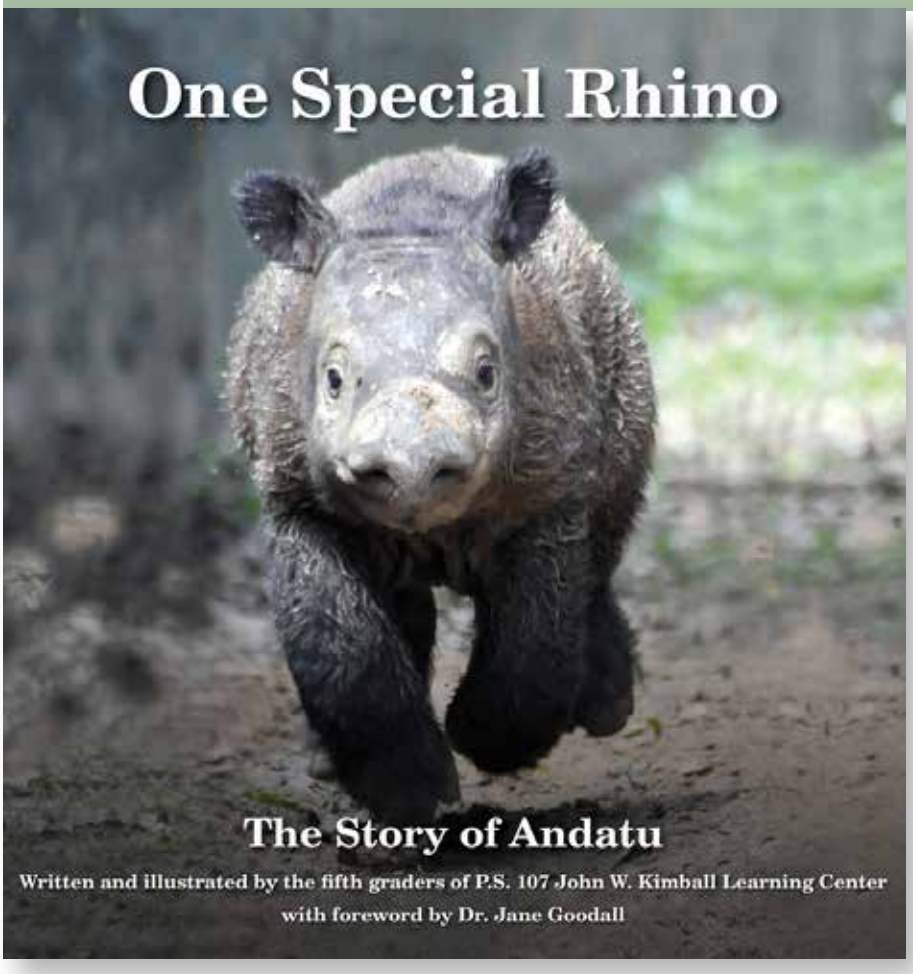
The Human Animal Connection, Tucson, AZ

Women of Color on the Move
Sacramento, CA

Women's Animal Center
Bensalem, PA

# #SPOTLIGHT ON

**Check out our #Spotlight Wednesdays on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram where we highlight great moments in Humane Education and the Human-Animal Bond!**




The Latham Foundation #Spotlight was on World Rhino Day 9/22! Rhinos have survived for 50 million years but today fewer than 27,000 remain, encompassing all of the five species. Hope is at the Way Kambas Rhino Sanctuary, on the island of Sumatra. "One Special Rhino: The Story of Andatu" is the true story of Andatu, the only Sumatran rhino to be born in captivity. It was written by fifth graders at an elementary school in Brooklyn, with a foreword by Dr. Jane Goodall.

*One Special Rhino: The Story of Andatu:* *www.amazon.com/One-Special-Rhino-Story-Andatu/*More parent/teacher tools for kids to learn about the predicament of Rhinos: *rhinos.org/learn/teacher-parent-tools/*

# #SERVICE-DOGS

#InternationalAssistanceDogWeek (August 2-8), Latham applauded both 2025 #grantees: Guide Dogs of America and Assistance Dogs of the West. This special week highlights the life-changing work of service dogs and all of those involved in their training. We also saluted previous 2024 #Grantee New Life K9s, featured in our film about inmates training service dogs, "Hope Unleashed." International Assistance Dog Week is organized by Assistance Dogs International (ADI), the world's leading accreditation body for training assistance dogs, whose accreditation all three grantees have earned. *https://adw505.org/*
*https://www.guidedogsofamerica.org/admissions/*
*https://www.newlifek9s.org/*






# Youth Changemaker Clubs:

## *Expanding the Power of Humane Education*

By Kristina Hulvershorn, Senior Program Director, LivingKind

LivingKind (formerly HEART) has reached over 150,000 students with a simple mission: to develop a generation of compassionate young leaders who create positive change for people, animals, and the natural world. As we enter this exciting new chapter as LivingKind, we are focused on deepening our impact and expanding our reach. To do that effectively, we knew we needed to look closely at our model and ensure it truly serves the next generation of changemakers.

In our latest strategic planning process, we made an intentional effort to deeply listen to young people who have been part of our programs and who care deeply about issues affecting animals, people, and the planet. Over and over again, we heard the same thing: learning about the issues is important, but making space to take action is even more critical. We sat with this feedback and recognized that the most transformative experiences occur when students are given sustained opportunities to learn, lead, and take action. Teaching young people how they can take action in their own lives also wasn't enough. Creating the time, space, and intentional effort to capture their ideas and allowing them to lead the way is what we needed to do.

Simultaneously, we were grappling with the difficulty of adding more to schools' overflowing task lists. These conditions led us to create the

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Youth Changemaker Club (YCC) model: a flexible, club-like structure that provides the framework to support a community of young people with the resources needed to take action. These clubs are propelled by the passion of the adults and the compassion of the young people, and the results so far have been more exciting than we anticipated.

While having a robust library of educational resources available to our partners, and accessible to anyone at the *LivingKind Resource Library,* provided a strong foundation, materials alone aren't enough. The truly essential element is a passionate adult mentor willing to share power and channel their enthusiasm alongside young people. With that mentorship in place, our structured process and continuous support handle the rest.

While many programs attempt to capture youth voice or leadership, most are still adult-designed structures that simply allow young people to participate. What we are attempting is fundamentally different: creating the circumstances where the compassion and creativity of young people truly drive the outcomes. Where adults don't dismiss young people's ideas but rather lean in, provide learning opportunities and structure, and allow them to step into a learning lab. Here, they build leadership skills by genuinely practicing leadership and find community with others who share their concerns.

Why is this approach so important? Try looking at the world from the perspective of a 12-year-old: "Adults before me made this problem. I'll spend more of my life addressing it and dealing with the repercussions of it than they will. Nonetheless, the same generations that created these systems are busy telling me how to fix them." Perhaps extending a bit more trust to young people would be a wiser invitation into the world of humane education.



Youth Changemaker Club members in Indianapolis design awareness posters for global deforestation and the plight of orangutans.

*Photo Credit Kristina Hulvershorn*

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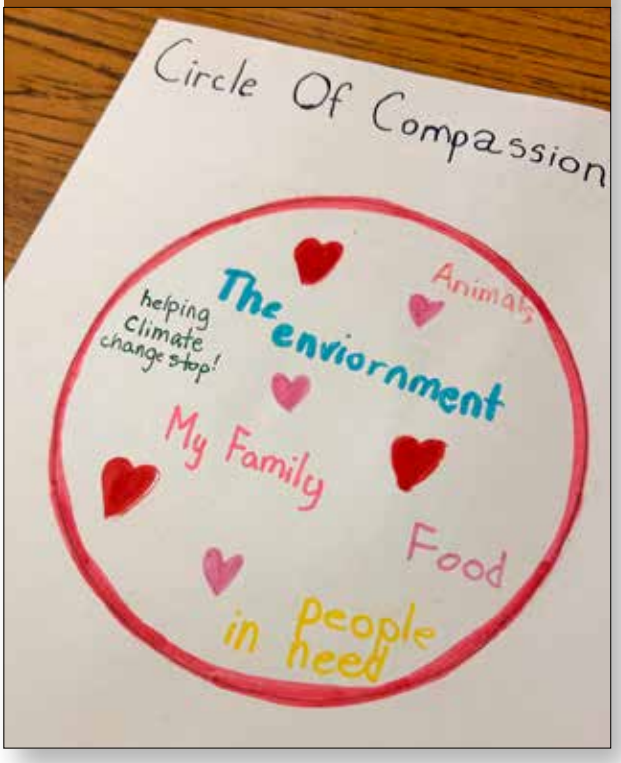
Furthermore, when people fail to act, it's rarely from a lack of kindness. Instead, a complex psychological barrier known as the 'prosociality paradox' holds us back—meaning that even though we have a natural urge to act prosocially (doing things to help or benefit others), our own mistaken anxieties about how we'll be received stop us from doing a good deed or speaking up. This is a reality our field has been highlighting for years. This paradox creates a systemic issue for the next generation: we expect children to emerge as thoughtful and compassionate leaders, yet we rarely give them the reins to actually practice leadership. Because we as adults are paralyzed by our own fear of imperfection, we withhold the very space young people need to take action. If we want a lifetime of people looking out for one another, we have to let them practice kindness early to build that essential muscle memory.

## Results

The pilot evaluation of the Youth Changemaker Clubs by Hello Insight (a research-backed evaluation platform for youth-serving organizations) revealed exceptional success. Most participants achieved between 90-97% growth in core Social Emotional Learning (SEL) capacities like social skills, self-management, and academic self-efficacy. This performance placed YCC youth ahead of 75% of comparable youth programs nationwide using this tool, earning a 100% satisfaction rate from the participants. By offering high-quality, youth-led, and adult-supported Positive Youth Development (PYD) experiences, the clubs are not only positively impacting animal, social justice, and environmental issues, but also setting up our participants for long-term thriving.

According to the Hello Insight Theory of Change, these short-term SEL gains serve as the essential launching pad for long-term thriving. By equipping young people with foundational psychological tools, the program sets a predictive trajectory for lifelong success. The specific capacities developed within the YCC framework directly translate into adult academic and career readiness, stronger mental health and resilience during life transitions, and a lasting commitment to civic contribution. Ultimately, the data suggest that the clubs are doing much more than executing successful community projects today; they are building the vital human infrastructure for youth to thrive continuously throughout their lives.

A club member's "circle of compassion," created during a brainstorming session of core issues they want to champion.







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Stepping into advocacy: Club members give a community presentation highlighting local and global organizations dedicated to animals.

We've watched quiet students step into leadership roles, find their voices, and articulate complex intersections between human, animal, and environmental welfare. Furthermore, educators and adult advisors note a dramatic increase in school connectedness and mutual trust. The tangible outcomes of their projects are wonderful, but the real result is the cultivation of a generation that no longer waits for permission to care or act.

## Testimonials

Hearing from those who have been part of these clubs has been powerful.

"*Just wanted to give you a huge THANK YOU! [My daughter] enjoyed being a part of this club more than I can explain. She has become our little policy warrior at home, and now [we] get to bond over making a difference in the world. It means so much to our family that you allowed her to join, and made the experience so impactful for her. She cannot wait to join again next year, and has a list of topics she would like to bring to the group!*"
- Youth Changemaker Club Parent

"*No animal too big. No human too small. We can change the world. We can change it all.*"
- Fourth-Grade Youth Changemaker Club Member

"*Imagine if you do this every year and soon it's in every school around the world*!"
- Fourth-Grade Youth Changemaker Club (YCC) Member

"*This work is the only thing keeping me in teaching.*"
- YCC Club Lead

## Our Process

Our process is intentionally designed to serve as a scaffolding with space for creativity, joy, and critical thinking. We provide a flexible structure that gives adult mentors the tools they need to co-create a brave space without dictating the destination. These initiatives can take place after school, in community centers, at Boys and Girls Clubs, animal shelters, sanctuaries or alongside student councils.

1. Deep Listening and Shared Power: We begin by establishing a culture where youth voices carry real weight. The passionate adult advisor steps back from the traditional "teacher" role to become a facilitator and collaborator.

2. Issue Identification: Using resources from our library and other learning resources, youth explore

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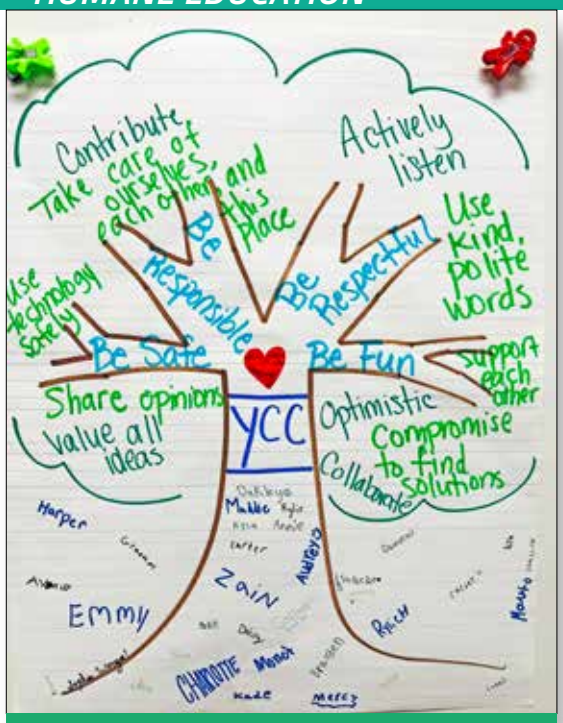


Texas club members set the foundation for collaboration and signed it.

the interconnected issues facing people, animals, and the planet. They identify what speaks to their hearts or sparks their passion right in their own communities.

3. The Changemaker-Learning Lab: Once a focus is chosen, the club maps out a solution-focused initiative. This is where youth manage budgets, assign roles, navigate logistics, and build project management skills. They also conduct root-cause analyses to ensure they are targeting structural issues rather than applying band-aid fixes.

4. Action and Reflection: The project is executed in the community, followed by deep, intentional reflection. We don't just ask, "What did we do?" but rather, "How did this change us, and what did we learn about our power to impact the world?"

## Positive Youth Development

At its core, the Youth Changemaker Club model is a living application of Positive Youth Development (PYD). Traditional models often view youth through a lens of deficit, as problems to be managed or vessels to be filled. We view them through a lens of assets. When young people are trusted to lead, their psychological and social development thrives. They move from passive consumers of education to active, empathetic architects of their own communities.

I have long believed that the power of youth has a lot to do with how much disempowering socialization they have to unlearn. Simply put, they are less jaded and more optimistic, less fearful and more bold. Where adults often see only tragedy in suffering animals and environmental emergencies, young people see a direct call to lead with compassion and rewrite the future.

## What Kinds of Projects Have Young People Led?

Because the clubs are entirely student-driven, the variety of projects reflects the brilliant, diverse minds of the youth themselves. From hands-on shelter support that saves lives to regional wildlife conservation, our students are demonstrating that humane education can be a direct catalyst for real-world animal advocacy.

**Companion Animal and Shelter Support:** Students frequently direct their passion toward helping local rescue organizations. In Chicago, teen volunteers partnered with the



YCC club members in Kenya work the garden, cultivating sustainable food projects to directly benefit and feed their local community.

*Photo Credit: Erick Nyambane*

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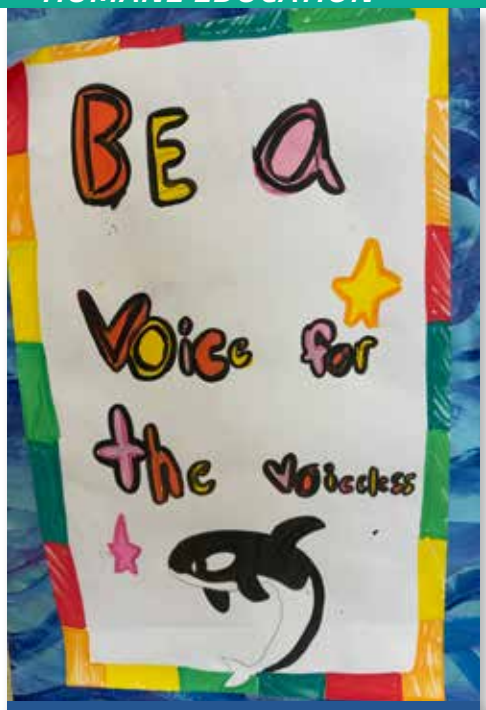



Student artwork to educate the public on global animal issues was showcased at a community art exhibition.

Anti-Cruelty Society to develop behavior education materials for new adopters, specifically aimed at reducing shelter pet return rates. Similarly, English as a New Language (ENL) high school students in Queens, NY, raised over $600 for a local shelter through a multilingual, culturally rich fundraiser.

**Wildlife and Sanctuary Advocacy:** Youth regularly tackle complex ethical issues surrounding captive and displaced animals. In Texas, elementary school students researched marine captivity and successfully lobbied an international decision-maker to support relocating captive orcas to a seaside sanctuary. Another cohort raised $452 for an elephant sanctuary through an ornament fundraiser and poetry reading, while students in Washington State built and distributed custom birdhouses and feeders to protect local wild birds displaced by urban development.

**Environmental and Climate Action:** Youth have launched campus composting and plastic reduction initiatives to protect shared ecosystems. In Indianapolis, students confronted global deforestation by targeting unsustainable palm oil consumption to protect endangered orangutans, combining community education with corporate letter-writing campaigns and even a youth-written and directed play to spread the word.

**Urban and Intersectional Community Care:** One club highlighted the value of consuming less by hosting a clothing resource drive for students in need. Meanwhile, a group in NYC seamlessly applied the civic advocacy skills they developed supporting companion animals to launch a new initiative at their school to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and student equality.



Teens collaborated with an animal behaviorist to research and design a supportive behavior brochure for new adopters.

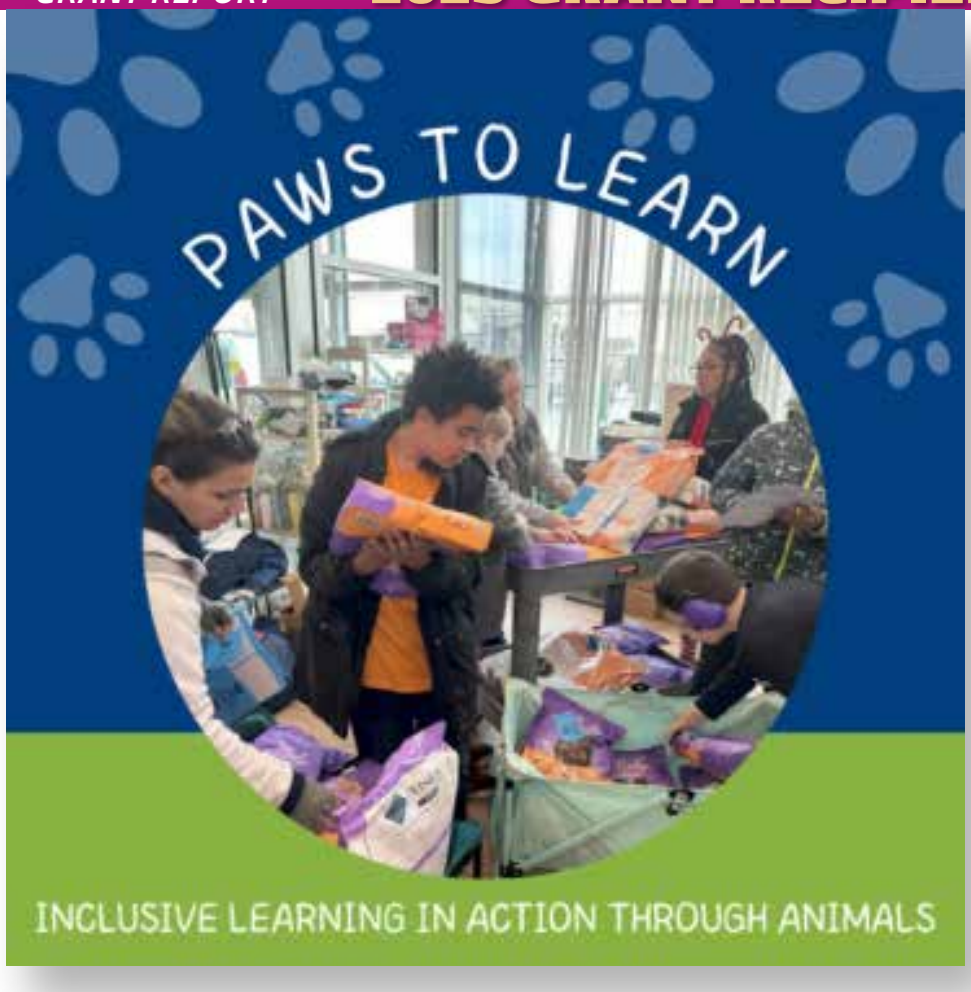
## How can I get involved?

Start here:
*living-kind.org/ycc*
We would love to get a YCC up and running in your space.

We are actively looking to expand our network of Youth Changemaker Clubs and welcome partnerships with all kinds of host organizations. Whether you are a shelter, a K-12 school, an after-school program, a youth community center, or an animal sanctuary looking to deepen your youth civic engagement, we provide the framework, support, and microgrants needed to help your youth succeed. By creating space for young people to practice kindness early, we aren't just teaching them about a better world; we are giving them the tools and space to build it. We invite you to join us in this movement. Let's extend our trust to the next generation and watch how they rewrite the future.

*Kristina Hulvershorn serves as the Senior Program Director for LivingKind, bringing a rich background as a public school teacher and nonprofit leader to her work. Experiencing firsthand the power of restorative justice and social-emotional learning, she is passionate about helping youth turn empathy into action. Kristina is the creator of the Be the Change humane education exhibit, co-creator of Climate Camp for over a decade, and author of Secret of the Troublemakers. She resides in Indianapolis, Indiana, alongside her husband and her daughters (both the human and non-human varieties).*

# 2025 GRANT RECIPIENT




Our sincerest thank you to the Latham Foundation for the Promotion of Humane Education for approving us for our 2025 grant. With this request, the Rhode Island SPCA was well equipped to offer a new program which we coined Paws to Learn programming for teens with intellectual, emotional, or behavioral disabilities in Title 1 schools in Rhode Island.

Over the course of the 2025-2026 school year, we were able to offer this program to a total of six Title 1 schools, reaching nearly 70 students. Each individual program consisted of two classroom visits, followed by one field trip to the shelter, with bussing provided. These schools include Rogers High School, Pilgrim High School, Jenks Junior High School, Hope High School, North Kingstown High School, and DelSesto Middle School. Our first visit included an introduction to the shelter and a meet and greet with an ambassador animal.

Our second school visit included an enrichment project and visit with an ambassador animal. The field trip to the shelter included a tour, enrichment project, and ended with a chance for students to meet a shelter animal.

We heard nothing but positive feedback from teachers and staff, many wishing that their students had more real-life opportunities to explore potential future careers. We formed new relationships with schools that we hope to continue every year going forward. Most of all, these students left our programs with a newfound knowledge of animal empathy and pet responsibility, further reinforcing our mission at the RISPCA.

Some challenges we faced included teacher communication as well as knowing how and when to interact with students. Although our Humane Education Team all have backgrounds in Education, learning how to make our program accessible to students with disabilities was a learning curve. We were able to ease this curve by meeting with teachers, getting curriculum approved before teaching, and researching activities that are developmentally appropriate for each individual group. Some examples of these include social stories, visual communication boards, photos, and repeated instruction. We relied heavily on teachers and chaperones to guide



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*cats interacting with the toys they had made—it really helped them make a meaningful connection between their efforts and the animals' well-being. Students also loved learning about humane education and animal care, building hay fortresses for the rabbits, and getting to meet a variety of animals up close.*

*"Overall, the experience was engaging, educational, and truly memorable for our students. We are so grateful for the opportunity to be part of this program!"*

While this is only one testimonial, other teachers expressed similar sentiments after the programs were completed. We truly believe this program has made a measurable impact on our Rhode Island community and look forward to seeing it grow in the following years. Thank you again to the Latham Foundation for making this possible.

us where we needed it, while also contributing our own teaching style along the way.

After their experience, one teacher posted on Facebook: *"The Humane Education programs at the RISPCA are wonderful! I highly recommend these programs to teachers."* She later added: *"We had a wonderful experience partnering with your team this year. The visits to our school were a great way to build excitement and connection ahead of the trip. Our students especially enjoyed creating toys for the cats and were so engaged in hands-on activities.*

*"The visit to the Rhode Island Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was incredibly impactful. It was such a powerful moment for students to see the*

Adrianna Sawaia, Education and Outreach Manager

Stephanie Van Patten, VP of Development and Communications

RHODE ISLAND SPCA
RHODE ISLAND SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS




# Back to School Without Dissection:

## *A Guide for Students and Parents*

By Jerome Schwich, Communications Director, National Anti-Vivisection Society

A new school year brings new teachers, new classes, and new opportunities to learn. For some students, it may also bring an uncomfortable discovery: animal dissection is part of an upcoming science course.

If you or your child does not want to participate in dissection, the best time to speak up is before the activity reaches the classroom. Starting the conversation early gives students, parents, and teachers more time to find an alternative that meets the course's learning objectives without harming animals.

Here are the steps students and parents can take to prepare for a school year without dissection.

### 1. Find out whether dissection is planned

At the beginning of the school year, review the course syllabus, class website, or other materials provided by the teacher. Look for references to dissection, preserved specimens, anatomy labs, or hands-on laboratory activities.

If the syllabus is unclear, ask the teacher directly. A simple question such as, "Will students be expected to participate in animal dissection this year?" can help you understand what is planned and how soon you may need to request an alternative.

Do not wait until the day of the activity. Raising the issue early makes it easier for the teacher to plan an appropriate assignment and shows that the request is thoughtful, serious, and focused on learning.

### 2. Start a respectful conversation with the teacher

For many students, approaching a teacher can feel like the hardest part. It is important to remember that asking for an alternative does not

*Continued on next page*



mean asking to skip an assignment or avoid learning the material.

Students can explain that they want to meet the same academic requirements through a humane option. They may choose to say:

*"I understand that dissection is planned for our class. For personal, moral, or religious reasons, I do not want to participate. I would like to complete an alternative activity that allows me to learn the same material. Can we work together to identify an option you would approve?"*

Students who are uncomfortable having this conversation in person can begin with an email. BioLEAP's Action Packet for Students includes a sample message, helpful talking points, and guidance for responding to common concerns about dissection alternatives.

Parents and guardians can help students prepare for this conversation or contact the teacher with them. Depending on state or district rules, a formal request from a parent or guardian may be required.

### 3. Know the Policies That Protect Students

Students in many parts of the country are protected by laws or policies that allow them to choose an alternative to animal dissection. These protections vary by state and school district, so it is important to understand what applies in your community.

Check out BioLEAP's student choice map to find information about student choice laws, statewide policies, general opt-out provisions, and other directives.

If your state does not have a specific student choice law, do not assume that dissection is mandatory. Your school district may have its own opt-out policy. Review the district's website, student handbook, curriculum policies, or procedures for raising a concern about classroom activities.

No state board of education requires participation in animal dissection as a condition of graduation, and colleges and universities do not require prospective students to have participated in dissection for admission.

### 4. Come Prepared With an Alternative

Teachers may be more receptive when a student does more than say no. Offering practical alternatives can turn a potentially difficult conversation into a collaborative one.

Humane anatomy tools can include:

- Reusable three-dimensional models
- Synthetic specimens
- Interactive digital programs
- Virtual dissections
- Augmented reality tools
- Videos, diagrams, and paper dissection models

These alternatives can still provide engaging, hands-on instruction. Some synthetic models can even be opened and explored with tools in ways that recreate parts of the traditional lab experience.

Students and parents can use BioLEAP's searchable Product Finder to identify options based on grade level, species, subject, and format. Sharing a few appropriate choices with the teacher can make it easier to agree on a replacement activity.

### 5. Make the Case for Humane Learning

Some educators may believe that animal dissection is necessary to understand anatomy or prepare for future science courses. The evidence tells a different story.

A systematic review involving NAVS examined 20 studies

*Continued on next page*

comparing animal dissection with non-animal teaching methods. In 19 of the 20 studies, students using non-animal models performed at least as well as students who participated in dissection. In most of those studies, students using the alternatives performed better.

Humane tools also allow students to repeat activities, work at their own pace, and review anatomical structures more than once. Unlike preserved specimens, many models can be used year after year, making them economical for schools over time.

Most importantly, humane alternatives allow students to remain fully engaged in science without asking them to set aside their ethical beliefs, religious convictions, sensory needs, or concern for animals.

Learn more about the educational benefits of dissection alternatives and the broader concerns surrounding animals used in life sciences education.

### 6. Build Support If Your First Request Is Denied

If a teacher is initially unwilling to provide an alternative, ask why. Understanding the concern will help you respond with relevant information about educational effectiveness, cost, available products, or student choice policies.

Students should also involve a parent or guardian and consider speaking with:



- The science department chair
- A school counselor
- A dean or assistant principal
- The principal
- A district curriculum administrator
- The superintendent or school board

Keep copies of emails and written requests, especially if a state or district policy protects the student's choice.

Classmates may also share similar concerns. A respectful request supported by several students and families can show school leaders that humane alternatives would benefit more than one individual.

### 7. Help Remove Funding as a Barrier

Sometimes a teacher supports humane learning but believes the school cannot afford new materials. BioLEAP can help address that concern.

The BioLEAP Classroom Grant provides eligible U.S. educators with up to $1,000 in humane anatomy tools, including synthetic specimens, physical models, and digital resources. Students cannot apply directly, but they can share the program with a teacher or administrator.

Because many humane models are reusable, one grant can support students for years while reducing the need to purchase new animal specimens for every class.

### Your Voice Can Help Change the Classroom

Choosing not to dissect does not mean choosing not to learn. It means asking for an educational experience that reflects both scientific goals and respect for animals.

One student's request can also create opportunities for many others. When a teacher introduces a humane alternative, that tool may remain in the classroom for future classes, helping more students participate comfortably while preventing animals from being killed for dissection.

As students return to school, now is the time to review upcoming coursework, learn about local protections, and begin the conversation. Students and parents do not have to navigate that process alone. Visit the BioLEAP Students and Parents resource center for practical tools, guidance, and support.

If you have exhausted the available options and still need help securing a humane alternative, contact the NAVS BioLEAP team at *bioleap@navs.org.*

# Blue's Final Gift

By Ashley Frye



Humans have intuitively known that when they spend time with animals and outdoors, they feel better. As time has gone by, some really important things got lost along the way. For many school children, a typical day is spent inside and by the time children reach middle school, there is very little time spent outdoors or in the presence of animals.

As a former educator, I have spent a lot of time thinking about that and the detrimental effect that has had on adolescents. Fortunately, I found my way to Wild Hearts Therapeutic Center and I now get to spend my days partnering with horses and school children.

Last year, we were thrilled to welcome a returning group of middle school students who visit once a month to partner with our equines. This particular group of students is in a self-contained behavioral classroom which means that they don't attend classes in a regular setting, but instead, are with one teacher and her support staff all day. In this group was a new student who had never been to the farm before and had never been around horses. The teacher who brought him actively sought him out because she felt so strongly that he would benefit from being with the equines.

Enter our sweet boy and gentle giant, Blue. Blue was an aging Percheron draft gelding and a few months prior had faced some health issues that rattled his confidence. Before these health issues, Blue had been a tried and true therapy horse - he was kind and patient and loved working with humans of

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all ages and abilities. But, his health issues left him struggling to feel confident and we knew it was best to let him rest, heal, and work through his struggles with support so he took a pause from the therapy program. We honestly didn't know if Blue would ever return and we wanted to honor his needs.

Months went by and with reverence for his needs and healing, Blue started to show interest in being with humans in a therapeutic way again. So as to not overwhelm him, we took it very slowly and he only partnered with one facilitator and a few clients. Blue continued to gain his confidence and was soon wandering the yard, asking for belly scratches from anyone who walked by. Because of this, we decided to introduce him to group settings again by starting with our middle school group. We knew this would allow us to keep a close eye on how he felt about it, and if Blue told us it wasn't for him, we would honor that.



Blue and students

It was a balmy fall day when the kids tumbled off the bus. Blue and several of his herdmates were standing quietly with volunteers as the kids made their way into the yard. We talked to them about Blue and told them all he'd been through, and that we believed their group was the best one for him to try group partnering again because of how wonderfully they considered the horses, how kindly and respectfully they handled them, how consistent they were in their actions, and what lengths they went to in order to make sure the equines felt safe and heard.

There are moments in this work where you just feel something and both my co-facilitator and I knew that the new student needed to partner with Blue. When Blue and this young man met, it was an immediate connection. Immediate. Thinking of it brings tears to my eyes as I type this, because Blue saw this young man as he was - not the labels that had been put on him, not the limiting words that were often used to describe him, not the masks he wore just to get through each day - Blue truly saw to the heart of this child, and this young man felt it. It was beautiful and powerful to witness. Blue was so relaxed that he did a lot of licking, chewing, and yawning, all indicators that a horse feels safe enough to process information and to feel things. And what began that day continued on for the next several months. The transformation

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Blue and Ashley

was palpable in both of them - they softened, they breathed deeper, they walked taller - together.

As it sometimes happens, Blue unexpectedly passed away in December. We were devastated. Our gentle old "unicorn" knew it was his time. My co-facilitator and I knew we had to let our student know before their next visit to the farm, and we wanted to support him through this loss. And while our hearts were broken, I believe that in death, equines give us one final gift - how to grieve well. How to mourn and fully feel the loss. Because ours is a society that doesn't handle the hard feelings well, horses and equines once again help us in the most supportive way if we follow their model - feel it, be present with it, and let it move through you. It hurts because those relationships mattered, those connections were real. With equines, it is the first time many humans feel fully seen and accepted. Blue taught this young man that - he was changed for the better by Blue and Blue was changed for the better by him. That is what a true partnership looks like. That is what caring for and listening to these magnificent animals can be.

We honored Blue's life and his passing when the students returned to the farm. We cried together. We memorialized his life and shared how he had positively affected us. And I'm absolutely positive that what that young man and Blue did for one another will be with us all of our days, in big and small ways.

*Ashley Frye co-directs and facilitates the 'All In for Student Connections' program at Wild Hearts. Ashley has a background in secondary education, where she taught for 11 years. As a child, she grew up around horses and recognized the magic of working with equines, so making the transition to equine therapy facilitation was an organic and joyful one. Ashley's work with these students has been made possible in part through the Latham Foundation's support.*



Blue at sunset




We would love to know your thoughts on this issue's articles. If you would like to share your own anecdote, story, photo, or artwork relating to one of Latham's steps to Humane Education, we would love to see it (and possibly publish it in *The Latham Letter*)! Editor@latham.org




## STREAMING FOR FREE: EDUCATIONAL VIDEOS FOCUSED ON EMPATHY AND KINDNESS

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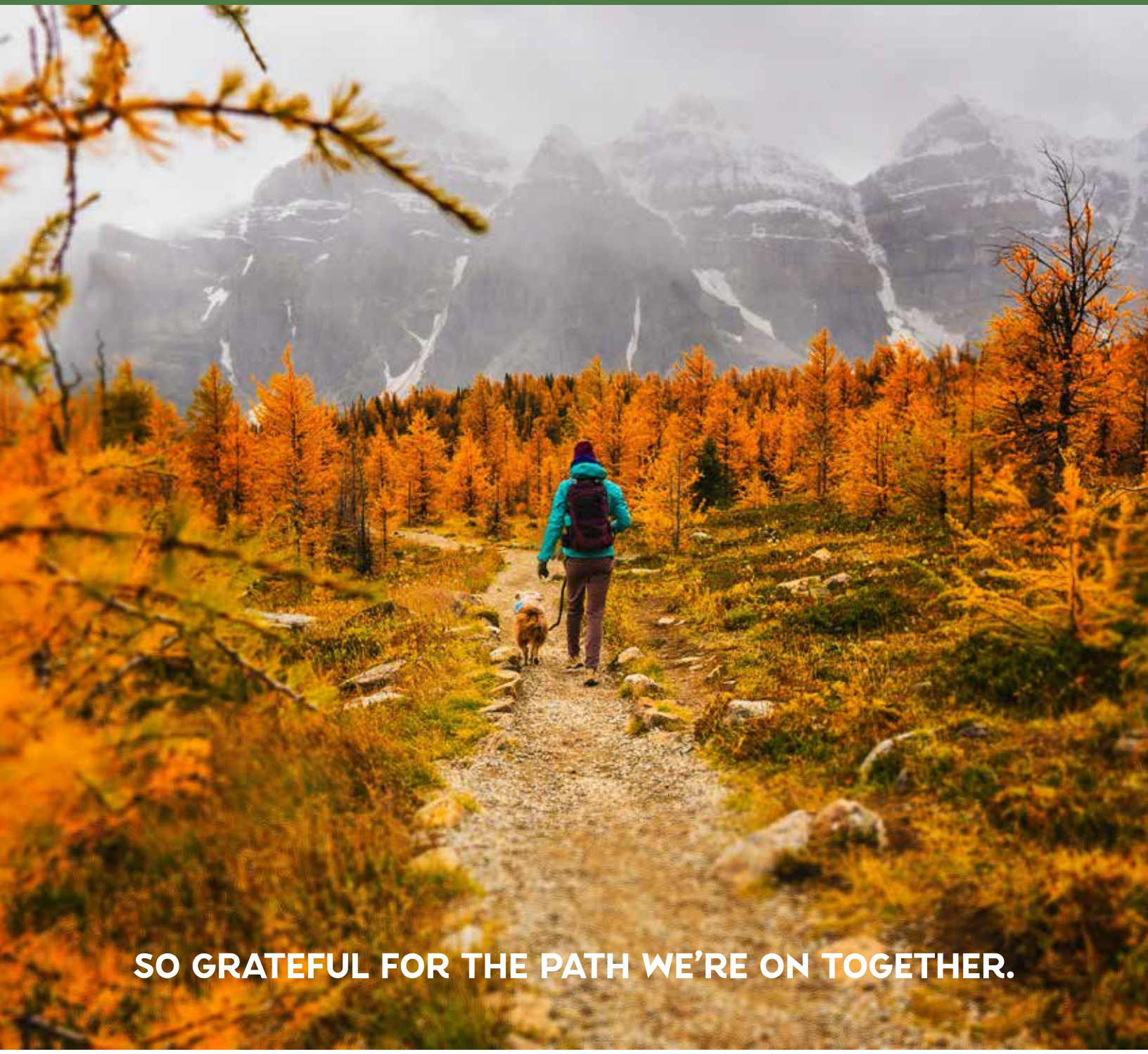


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