

CONNECTING KIDS AND ANIMALS

A tween dynamo showed Diane LaDouceur what animals teach us about one another.

AS A RECREATION coordinator for the city of Oxnard, California, Diane LaDouceur knows how to make all kinds of fun happen for kids in her community. But the program that's closest to her heart was sparked by a young hero she learned about on a May 2009 *Oprah* show: Mimi Ausland, who at age 11 created Freekibble, a charity that donates food to shelter animals. Diane realized that working with animals would be a great way for her daughter, Alison, to contribute to the community and build leadership skills. Alison, who weighed only 18 ounces when she was born and suffers from a seizure disorder, already had a tight bond with the family's two dogs: Halo, a cocker spaniel, and Sadie, a Border collie.

Two summers ago, shortly after seeing that *Oprah* episode, Diane and Alison formed a club of about ten girls, calling it Animals & Us. One of the group's first activities was to take some of their own pets for therapy-dog training—Sadie turned out to be a natural. She frequently joins Alison,

now 12, for visits to schools, special-needs classes, and nursing homes. The group has also visited the Ventura

County Humane Society, where they pitched in to help feed animals and clean cages. The girls have really taken charge, Diane says, even dreaming up their own publicity and fund-raising ideas, like a dog-washing program in partnership with a local groomer.

Animals & Us is such a hit with the girls—and the community—that they're expanding their activities and outreach. This spring they gave a presentation to a fifth-and-sixth-grade classroom about buying and caring for rabbits; they also brought rabbits to several local Easter egg hunts and taught younger children how to play gently with them. Diane is working to set up more Animals & Us clubs at schools and after-school programs, and is especially passionate about the joy that therapy dogs bring to special-needs students. "I want to light a fire like my fire was lit by that *Oprah* show," she says. "These programs teach kids about uniqueness and difference—in animals and in people. We're building character and compassion."



Animals & Us; Diane and her daughter, Alison (front row), invited their two- and four-footed friends to join the club.