

"I think I was born with it."



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As the brainchild behind **Freekibble.com**,  
Mimi Ausland is running her own

# food network

By Karen Asp

**Y**ou might say that a piece of rice catapulted Mimi Ausland to fame. But it's not fame that this 14-year-old from Bend, Oregon, is seeking. She's simply trying to feed shelter animals one kibble at a time, and so far, the success of her popular website, **Freekibble.com**, has outpaced even her wildest dreams.

Mimi's love of animals was evident from a young age. "I think I was born with a passion for animals," she says. By age five, she was so infatuated with animals that she began begging her parents for a cat. They acquiesced, and into Mimi's life came Dot the cat. Hamsters, fish and a golden retriever named Aspen followed. Soon, she began riding horses and, at nine years old, started volunteering with her mom at her local animal shelter.

Yet it wasn't until September 2007, when a relative introduced her to an online game called **Freerice.com**, that Mimi found her calling. The game asks questions about language, grammar, math, chemistry and geography; for every correct answer, 10 grains of rice are donated to help end hunger worldwide. As Mimi played the game with her family, she began wondering: What if something similar could be done for animals?

For the next seven months, Mimi, with the help of her parents, hammered out ideas and came up with a concept inspired by **Freerice.com**: **Freekibble.com**, which would feature a daily trivia question about dogs. Whether participants answered correctly or not, 10 pieces of kibble would be donated to shelter dogs just for playing the game. For cats, Mimi created a sister site, **Freekibblekat.com**, which would operate in a similar fashion, donating 10 pieces of kibble to shelter cats every time somebody played the trivia game.

"Mimi has always loved animals and her passion for them led her to create **Freekibble**," says Mimi's mom, Brooke Smith. "It's hard to believe how big it has become, but with a heart as big as Mimi's, it doesn't surprise me."

With the concept in hand, Mimi then approached local businesses to ask them to sponsor her site. One of the businesses was a pet store, which agreed to donate food.

Mimi says, "Even though we were working hard to promote **Freekibble.com** through friends, family, my classmates and newspaper ads, we weren't expecting that many viewers." In fact, Mimi launched the site with only one goal in mind. "I wanted to feed

some of the animals at the Humane Society of Central Oregon, where I volunteer," she says, adding that she knew that securing food donations wasn't always an easy task for the shelter. "If I could feed 20 animals, I was going to be thrilled."

In April 2008, **Freekibble.com** went live, and within months, the site had struck a chord with animal lovers. Just three months after it was launched, about 1,000 people were

playing daily. "I think it became such a success because it's fun, easy and free and gives people a chance to help homeless animals, especially if they don't have time or money," Mimi says.

Today, about 53,000 people play **Freekibble.com** daily while another 47,000 test their trivia knowledge at **Freekibblekat.com**. Although most of those players come from the U.S., there are people playing from 137 different countries. As a result, as of December 31, 2010, **Freekibble.com** had donated more than 470 million pieces of kibble to shelter dogs and cats since its creation in April 2008, and that number will no doubt continue to skyrocket.

So where does all that food come from? Last August, Halo, Purely for Pets, a pet food company co-owned by talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres, became **Freekibble.com**'s exclusive food sponsor. In fact, Mimi appeared on Ellen's talk show in 2008, and afterward, Ellen donated a significant amount of food to **Freekibble.com**. When Mimi approached Halo about becoming the food sponsor, the deal was made.

## Keeping up with the kibble

While Mimi loves seeing the number of players climb on **Freekibble.com**, she gets the biggest thrill from seeing the food delivered to the animals. "It makes me realize how much of a difference **Freekibble.com** is making, especially when I see the faces of animals we're helping," she says.

**Freekibble.com** makes monthly food donations to 14 shelters around the country, including the one at which Mimi volunteers in Bend. "Mimi has alleviated the need for us to spend time requesting donations of food for our animals," says Lynne Ouchida, community outreach coordinator for the Humane Society of Central Oregon. "It's even more inspiring to know Mimi's effort has grown to feeding homeless animals in several shelters across the nation."

More than 100 shelters and rescue groups also receive large one-time donations, and each group is carefully screened. Mimi

admits that it's tough turning down shelters. "We're so focused on saving lives that it's hard to say no," she says, "but we just can't feed every shelter we get requests from."

Requests come in daily. In fact, Mimi is flooded with hundreds, if not thousands, of e-mails each week, and she tries to answer each one. It's not an easy task, considering all she has on her plate besides Freekibble.com: dealing with normal teenage concerns, volunteering at the shelter and carving out time to play with her pets.

Every month, Mimi greets the Freekibble.com food donation at the Bend shelter, doling out a few bowls of food to the animals. She promotes the site through events and interviews (she has also been interviewed for NBC's *Nightly News with Brian Williams*), and every night she creates two new trivia questions about dogs and cats, scouring newspapers, books, even Animal Planet shows. "It's definitely getting harder to create questions, especially since I want to make them fun and educational and try not to repeat any," she says.

By the way, Freekibble.com doesn't just feature trivia questions. Mimi has loaded the site with tons of other fun things, including an iPhone application called Kibble Katch that also allows you to donate food to shelter animals whenever you play, free e-cards, Kibble Kartoons and coupons for Halo products. There's even an onsite store where you can buy Freekibble.com merchandise like bumper stickers and T-shirts.

### Hope for shelter animals

As crazy as it sounds, though, Mimi's work has only just begun. Last summer, she spearheaded a letter-writing campaign to encourage President Obama to create a national adopt-a-shelter-

pet day. The campaign ended in September with a total of 320,972 e-mails and letters, which were presented to the White House in hopes of securing a proclamation for this special day. Mimi is hoping to hear about an official proclamation from the White House soon.

She has also created the Freekibble.com Foundation, which encourages kids to get involved with shelter animals. "We hear from so many kids who want to help animals but don't know how," she says. The foundation will raise money for grants to be awarded to kids who want to help their local shelters.

Further down the road, Mimi hopes to open her own animal sanctuary, much like Best Friends, where she volunteered about four years ago. Her grandmother had adopted a cat from Best Friends for Mimi, who became so interested in the Sanctuary that she spent spring break volunteering there with her grandmother and parents. "Best Friends made me even more passionate about animals and has inspired me to have this dream for the future," she says.

Until then, though, Mimi will focus her efforts on Freekibble.com, and she encourages everybody to do what they can to help shelter animals. "So many animals need our help," she says. "The smallest things, whether it's opening a lemonade stand and donating the proceeds to a shelter or playing Freekibble.com, can make the biggest difference." 🐾

*Karen Asp is an Indiana-based journalist who shares her home with a golden retriever and two cats. She's a contributing editor for Woman's Day and writes regularly for Self, Women's Health Prevention, Real Simple, Glamour, Men's Fitness, Redbook, Fitness and Weight Watchers.*

## Young people around the country are getting into the act. Meet five others who are doing good for animals!

### [www.hsash.org](http://www.hsash.org)

When 15-year-old Arianne Melton was a fifth grader, she enlisted the aid of her brother Peter and started a nonprofit organization called Help Shelter Animals Stay Happy (HSASH), which organizes events to help local shelter animals in Gresham, Oregon. Two of its popular events include the Holiday Drive in December and the Independence Day Drive in July, both of which collect food and supplies for shelters. HSASH is currently working to establish year-round, permanent drop-off sites for items for a weekly delivery to a shelter.

### [www.petmask.com](http://www.petmask.com)

Twelve-year-old Monica donates air masks for pets to fire departments. Roughly 40,000 to 100,000 pets die every year from smoke inhalation as a result of fires, according to some estimates. While

masks for pets do exist (human masks don't fit on pets), they're often so expensive that fire departments can't afford them. Monica has raised enough money to donate more than 325 pet oxygen masks to fire departments, EMS units and K9 units across the country and Canada.

### [www.animalpantry.org](http://www.animalpantry.org)

After adopting a pet from a local shelter, nine-year-old Zach Wilson and his mom, Erica, knew they needed to do something to help shelter animals. So they created the Animal Pantry. Through food drives and sponsors, they donate food and supplies every Thursday from their distribution location in Longwood, Florida.

### [www.jurneesjourney.org](http://www.jurneesjourney.org)

In 2007, Jurnee Carr founded Jurnee's Journey, an organization that provides funds, dog and cat food, cat litter and

blankets to no-kill animal rescue groups. The organization holds about 10 fundraising events a year and also partners with other businesses and nonprofit organizations to raise funds. So far, the 15-year-old Jurnee has raised more than \$10,000 for animals.

### [www.zazzle.com/denajmiller](http://www.zazzle.com/denajmiller)

As part of her bat mitzvah preparation, Dena Miller, 13, went to Israel to learn about the country. She was struck by the feral cat overpopulation problem and began photographing the cats. Back at home, those photographs evolved into a project called Paws for Thought, a fundraising mission for the Guardian Angel program at Best Friends. All of the proceeds from the sale of her photographs go to Best Friends. Dena also donated money from her bat mitzvah and has raised more than \$10,000 for Best Friends.