

Kibble for Critters

Bend 12-year-old grabs local, national spotlight for animal-supporting Web site that works to provide food for sheltered dogs and cats.

by Lori Gleichman, for *The Bulletin Special Projects Department*

Sometimes, something little can become really big, really fast. That's the challenge facing Mimi Ausland, 12, and her parents Kelly and Brooke.

When www.freekibble.com launched in April, Mimi thought her Web site (modeled after the popular www.freerice.com) would generate some donations of dog food to help out the Humane Society of Central Oregon.

"It was a little thing I could do to help the homeless animals," said Mimi, who had been donating money

to and volunteering with the shelter for years.

Some word of mouth, a few posters hung around town, and other animal-lovers forwarding the Web site link helped www.freekibble.com "raise" about 1,000 pounds of dog food in the first few months. Then, along came a little bit of publicity on the NBC Nightly News and a one-page feature in the National Enquirer, and suddenly www.freekibble.com

closed in on a major milestone—10,000,000 pieces of kibble donated via the Web site in just the month of July.

"The numbers just went really high after the NBC story aired," said Mimi.

The site is now getting hits from all around the world, and Mimi is getting about 200 e-mails each day from kids and adults. She has also been contacted by other big names in the national media regarding further interviews.

It's made her a bit of a celebrity—"in the animal world at least," she said—but all the attention isn't

Mimi Ausland (left, on a tall stack of donated dog food) poses below with her own dog, Aspen.
Photos by Lyle Cox.





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Mimi (above) unloads a van full of donated pet food at the Humane Society of Central Oregon in Bend.

going to her head.

“It’s fun, I guess,” said the composed sixth grader.

What she really understands is that the publicity is necessary to sustain her mission—to feed hungry, homeless animals in shelters via hits to her Web sites.

And she’s quickly understanding the hard work, time and commitment it takes to manage initiatives like www.freekibble.com, which has been joined by www.freekibblekat.com.

“We consider her the C.E.O.,” said Kelly, her dad. “It was Mimi’s idea, and we want her to be involved in every aspect of the project.”

“We have meetings to talk through ideas and what it will take to expand any more. Brooke and I are charged up to help her push this along and support her, but we consider it her commitment.”

The first step was putting

together a proposal for the Humane Society of Central Oregon (HSCO). At first, Lynne Ouchida, its community outreach director, was leery.

“We get a lot of kids who want to help with a school project, but we have to be cautious about committing resources to something that won’t be sustainable,” she said.

However, it was apparent from the first pitch that Mimi and her parents had thought through what was involved in launching and managing www.freekibble.com, and it was very clear “they were in it for the long run.” This alleviated Ouchida’s concern that Mimi would quickly lose interest in the project, and the source of pet food would disappear.

Once HSCO was on board, Mimi started soliciting sponsors to actually donate the pet food and secured the early support of Bend

Pet Express.

Kelly got to work on building the Web site, while Brooke worked on the graphics and design. Mimi’s job continues to be creating a list of trivia questions to draw people to the two sites every day.

Mimi’s parents were happy to support her idea, “because we knew it was a good, creative vehicle for her to have an impact on something she cares about,” said Kelly.

But they didn’t expect the results.

In mid-August, 10,000 pounds of pet food—the equivalent of 10 million pieces of kibble—will be delivered to shelters in Central Oregon, Washington and Kansas. In fact, if donations via the Web sites continue at the current pace, the Auslands and Ouchida estimate they can feed animals in 20 shelters around the country.



That's what we mean by something getting "really big, really fast." But Mimi and her parents seem up to the challenge, said Ouchida.

They've secured a national sponsor to provide the pet food across the country. The Web site, www.zootoo.com, a social networking site for pet-lovers, has close ties to pet food manufacturers through its founder, Richard Thompson, who also founded Meow Mix.

"Helping Mimi is a pleasure," said Thompson, who is happy to leverage his relationships with major pet store chains and food manufacturers into "kibble" donations. "It's incredible that she's so young, but already giving so much to animals."

Both he and Ouchida

Before she conceived of the idea for the Web site, freekibble.com, Mimi was a regular volunteer at the Humane Society of Central Oregon.

recognize that her contribution goes far beyond pet food donations. The increased visibility for homeless animals has resulted in more adoptions, more financial donations, and more people willing to get involved.

"There's definitely a ripple effect," said Ouchida. "The exposure increases interest in animal welfare, which is critical at a time when we're seeing an increase in abandoned animals while donations of food and money have gone down."

In addition to feeding animals at the shelter, donations of premium food via freekibble.com and freekibblekat.com also support pet-feeding programs at senior centers and food pantries in Central Oregon.

"Mimi and her parents have truly inspired me," said Ouchida. "Every day is

a new day, but not every day is a good day at the shelter," she said, referring to the sad reality of homeless pets. "But watching that family in action is a breath of fresh air. They're grounded in love and what's best for Mimi, but have also demonstrated what can be accomplished if you have some vision and some commitment."

As for Mimi, she's busy researching trivia for her Web sites, working with Ouchida to identify additional shelters to benefit from the pet food donations, and considering what it would take to launch a potential third site dedicated to "raising hay" to feed horses.

That idea generates a wince followed by a smile from her dad.

"She believes in this with all her heart," said Kelly. "So, we'll figure out how to support her."



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