

Stories from Peace Camp 2011 ~ The Lion and the Lamb

by Mary Gemmill

What can animals teach us about peace? How are we connected to the animals that share our earth? Earlier this summer, 42 campers and a dozen teen counselors explored these questions at ICPJ's Peace Camp.

The Bible verse commonly paraphrased as "the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and a child shall lead them" inspired the theme, "The Lion and the Lamb." We hope the Peace Camp experience inspired the children to become future leaders in the peace movement.

Throughout the week, we met many wonderful animals and people. Heidi Miller of 4-H introduced her lamb, Hope. Hope was born with deformed legs and rejected by her mother. Heidi saved Hope's life by bottle feeding the lamb and massaging its legs. Through Heidi's compassion, Hope's legs grew strong and straight.

We were thrilled to visit with animals from Strawberry Hill and to hear from Melissa Bishop about lions, tigers and monkeys at East Coast Exotic Animal Rescue. We are especially grateful that Melissa took time in the midst of repairs/renovations necessitated by flooding at the rescue center. She invited us to bring our families to see the animals "in person" after the Rescue reopened in July.

One Camp family brought a litter of kittens. The tiny kittens cuddled into a camper's neck as though craving attention. The mother abandoned her litter; now they were headed for the SPCA. We later learned that the SPCA typically receives 200 kittens each month but only about 15 find homes.

A counselor brought "Queen Elizabeth," his pet boa. Quiet campers watched at Elizabeth's mealtime. The drama of hungry snake and frightened mouse unfolded before our eyes. Some felt compassion for the mouse; others understood the snake could be fed no other way. But when the snake lunged, we all instinctively jumped and shrieked.

Another "pet", a turtle found by the roadside, provided lessons in decision-making. The campers debated a name for the charming fellow but could not reach consensus. After watching the turtle struggle to escape his box, some campers lobbied to release him. They argued that the turtle was unhappy and deserved freedom. Eventually, almost everyone agreed to return him to the wild.

One brave, freckled-faced lad insisted on keeping the turtle until a compromise was proposed. In exchange for naming rights, our lone dissenter agreed to free the turtle. We planned a ceremonious release to follow a presentation by SPCA manager Dawn Wilke. Dawn gave us lots of information about interacting with animals but when she explained that it is illegal to keep a wild species, a collective gasp was heard. She applauded our decision to release our turtle. The campers say that "Boxy" nodded 'good-bye' before he walked to the creek behind Bethel Mennonite Church.

On the last day of camp, we made bird mobiles inspired by peace doves and by cranes, a symbol of peace in Japan. Anne Zabawa showed us her homing pigeons and then set them free. As the birds wheeled overhead, they carried aloft our hopes and dreams of peace.

We are grateful to Bethel Mennonite Church for letting us use their church. Also, thanks to everyone who let us visit with their critters, to the adult volunteers and to our teen counselors – heroes to the campers – who contributed to a wonderful Peace Camp experience.

Mary Gemmill has served as director of ICPJ's Peace Camp since 2009. Mary is one of the founding 'mothers' of the Interfaith Center for Peace and Justice, and currently serves as the clerk of Menallen Friends Meeting in Biglerville. She is an active volunteer for the American Red Cross, Head Start, the Adams County Library and Collaborating for Youth. For more information about ICPJ and Peace Camp, visit www.icpj-gettysburg.org.