

JOIN THE CLUB

Jennifer Bresler brings the work of her childhood mentor, Dr. Jane Goodall, to some very enthusiastic Greenwich school kids

by **CHRIS HODENFIELD** photograph by **VISKO HATFIELD**

ATTENTION ALL HUMAN RESOURCES professionals: When looking over resumes from young recruits, be sure to flag anyone who says they've participated in a group called Roots & Shoots. Chances are good you have stumbled upon a very good find.

This is the general notion that would strike anyone who walked into the classroom of science teacher Jennifer Bresler at Greenwich's Central Middle School and witnessed the lively pandemonium of twenty breathless school kids explaining how they discovered real meaning in their lives. It all happened, the students claim instantly, through their membership in this organization.

Roots & Shoots is a network of clubs started twenty years ago by the famed naturalist Jane Goodall, known for her pioneering studying of chimpanzees in Tanzania. But it's not all monkey business. The concerns are animals, humans and the environment. The goal is to find projects that will somehow help.

There are clubs in 120 countries. More than 200 colleges boast a chapter, although there are no restrictions on age—there are six-year-olds who've started groups

as well as folks in retirement homes. There was even a Roots and Shoots group started in a reform school.

And now a reporter is visiting Ms. Bresler's classroom after school and the kids are eager to share. Their voices quaver and shake as they bubble over and rush to explain. Because they know things have happened in the world, they've staged a riot of different fundraisers over the years. They have seen *results*.

There is now, for instance, a solar-powered schoolhouse in Africa thanks to their actions; a group of kids in a desolate corner of Haiti now have solar-powered flashlights to get them through the night; an orphanage in Bogotá, Colombia, is better equipped to care for lost children thanks to funds raised right here. They've got the photographs tacked to the wall along the scratched-up letters of thanks.

"We haven't been able to set up a pen-pal system, unfortunately," says Jen, "but we're working on that. It took a lot of years to make it happen, but the kids did a lot of research about West Africa."

The Central Middle School group did not come into being via any official sanction or congressional edict. Anyone can start a group just by going to

Jennifer Bresler (front row, center) and coadvisor, Sue Stoga (third row, right) with the Roots & Shoots gang



Dr. Jane Goodall inspired Jennifer starting at a young age.



Jennifer Bresler feeding her foster chimp Christophe



Rootsandshoots.org and signing up for free. There is a list of local chapters already going, and newcomers get to inspect a database containing thousands of project ideas.

A Roots & Shoots project might be something as simple as building a bird feeder or cataloguing local wildlife movement. Or it might be an astonishing adventure, such as the river reclamation project mounted by a club in Petaluma, California, that not only saved a dying river but funded a \$30,000 fish hatchery to stock it.

The Haitian project was kicked off at Central Middle School after last year's earthquake when the kids learned that the school's Haitian bus drivers were devastated by the news back home. The kids threw themselves into organizing a talent show, an international festival, games, food drives, all to gather funds—and a shred of hope—for the Haitian families.

The Greenwich kids were lucky to have a very inspiring figure in the presence of this Jennifer Bresler, who helped get the first Roots & Shoots group going in 2007 with a band of five kids. The number expanded fast, and now her graduates are just starting a chapter at

“She’s an amazing woman. She has this aura about her that is incredibly peaceful and wise. She’s a very inspirational speaker.”

—Jennifer Bresler on Dr. Jane Goodall

Greenwich High School.

It’s easy to see why kids love Jen Bresler. She projects the youthful, energetic glow of someone who loves what she’s doing. She talks quickly, laughs easily and loves to get something done. And where did she get so fired up on the Goodall way of living? It turns out she had actually touched the hem of the great lady’s garment herself as a child.

“I’ve known Jane Goodall all my life,” she explains,



A well in Damana, Mali, funded by Roots & Shoots, brings families much-needed clean water.

one day after class. “Ever since I was in middle school myself, actually. My dad worked for the State Department, so I had the good fortune of traveling a lot when I was growing up. I spent four years in Kinshasa, now in the Democratic Republic of Congo.”

Her family was upset at seeing orphaned chimpanzees, whose parents had most likely been killed for their meat, being sold as pets in the marketplace. Ralph Bresler acted as liaison between the government and Jane Goodall to get the chimps confiscated. “So they had all these orphan chimpanzees on their hands,” Jennifer recalled. “My mom said, ‘We’ll help



Roots & Shoots brings books to the children of St. Jude’s orphanage in Ugnada, many of whom have lost their parents to conflict in the region.



Jennifer in Damana, Mali, helping to build the schoolhouse funded by Central’s Roots & Shoots program. The project was completed in 2005.

Art time with the children at St. Jude’s



Roots & Shoots New England fair in Providence, Rhode Island

Roots & Shoots:
Run For the Wild



It's easy to see why kids love Jennifer Bresler. She projects the youthful, energetic glow of someone who loves what she's doing.



Alexandra Sazhin decorating a visor at the Spring International Festival

out.' So we got a chimp into our home to foster parent and his name was Chris. We took care of him until he was good enough to return to one of the chimpanzee sanctuaries in Africa."

Living in the Congo for four years, she saw a lot of Jane Goodall, who always seemed to be coming through and checking up. The woman is known for being on the road 300 days a year. As with everyone who ever met her, young Jen was impressed to the point of being awestruck.

"She's an amazing woman," Jen says softly. "She has this aura about her that is incredibly peaceful and wise. She's a very inspirational speaker." Indeed, one Greenwich student tells a story about her father: He had never even heard of Jane Goodall, but after he heard her speak, he was so moved he went home and openly wept.

Another girl, Pippa Biddle, eighteen, says she started stuttering when she first met Goodall. "We're the same height, so it's not like she's towering over me. But I feel she is. She just has a presence. She is so calming. And she's a master storyteller. You just want to sit there and listen for hours. One girl said it perfectly: When Jane asks you to do something, you don't say no.

"But she's not a forceful person, necessarily. She's like the ultimate grandmother—she's caring and nurturing and she's a force to be reckoned with."

As with Jen Bresler, Pippa Biddle's introduction to Goodall turned her into something of an apostle. She first began to follow her as a student in her hometown of Katonah, New York. Now, she is taking a gap year before starting college at Lewis & Clark, and putting in a year on behalf of Roots & Shoots.

In the eighteen years of Pippa's life one can find the events that would create the ideal Roots & Shoots activist. Her father, Ed Biddle, works for JP Morgan Chase, and his idea of a family vacation was, say, surfing in Nicaragua. "My family put an emphasis on experience," she says, "not things. So I didn't have the nicest clothes in school, but I had the best spring breaks. Then my mother went back to school to get her masters because she teaches athletics to the underprivileged."

Armed with such inspirational ammunition, she flies around the country speaking to various Roots & Shoots groups. She just went to Abu Dhabi to address the Global Issues Conference at the American Community School and there she discussed "action plans" with students from Bangladesh, Nigeria, Israel,



Roots & Shoots students with Dr. Jane Goodall: (back row) Raquel Irefej, Gardy Lebon, Sydney Schieffelin, Joonsung Lee, Emma Rodrigues; (middle row) Marissa Kelland, Tom Bacon, Dr. Jane Goodall, Molly Clisham, Juliette McGinnis, Vanessa Raskin, Pascale Carrel; (front row) Rachel Pennella, Veronica Prezioso, Talia Waxman

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The kids from Egypt did not need action plans so much as they needed calming down, as they were unable to call home.

Pippa made this trip, by the way, on her own at age eighteen.

MOTIVATIONAL MATRIX

Sydney Schieffelin was a seventh grader when she moved to Greenwich. That would normally be a difficult age to get acclimated to a new town, but she fell into the motivational matrix of Jen Bresler's Roots & Shoots group. "Ms. Bresler and the others welcomed me," she recalls. "I felt optimistic."

For good reason: She was surrounded by kids who had a mission. Their chief concern came to be a little town called Damana in the Saharan nation of Mali. They'd heard that the schoolkids there were crammed into a mud hut.

Sydney and friends learned about the situation directly from Goodall herself, when she spoke at a fundraiser hosted by her mother, Stacey Schieffelin, the former Ford model turned founder of YBF (Your Best Friend), a beauty and cosmetic line seen on the Home Shopping Network.

"We were having brunch for 150 people at our home," says Sydney, "and it ended up being 250. They heard Jane speak and it was breathtaking to see such

passion. They were just like, 'Please, what can we do?'"

The Greenwich kids launched a drive to raise funds to get the schoolhouse built. "We worked with a group called Practical Small Projects," says Sydney. "We sent all the money over and they built the well and the schoolhouse for us. We thought, Don't they need energy to run the well and the schoolhouse? If they had solar power, they would never have to add the cost of power. Let's raise the money so they can have education forever and the school won't be shut down.

"It's such an amazing feeling, getting the pictures back of these children, not getting a normal life but at least a better life. Ms. Bresler has inspired so many people with what Jane Goodall says: It's all about the kids, it's all about the future. We need to make it brighter for them. That's all we can really hope for."

A GHS freshman, Sydney made her return to Central Middle School along with Raquel Irefej to help the kids



Winners of the 2010 Roots and Shoots fundraiser talent show: third place, Indian classical dancer Megha Dhond; second place, vocalist Annika Tilly; first place, dancers Jasmine Dickens, Alea Than, Niamarie Vargas and Megan Casseus

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face the press. If Ms. Bresler needed a hand, they were on it.

The excitement was palpable. There was also an automatic and effortless politeness. Listening to the eighth-graders talk, it swiftly becomes clear that the biggest tutorial they're getting is actually a major life lesson. From organizing fundraisers, they're learning to organize their lives.

"Roots & Shoots isn't just about raising money," says Rachel Pennella, seated at a desk with her cohorts. "It's about getting the community involved. Getting to know people around the world."

"The students put together so many events," chimes in Pascale Carrel, "And it's all about working together, filling in the holes, accommodating each other. Certain people have [skills] that others don't have. We've all had to teach each other. We bring out the best in each other."

"What we're learning will carry us through life," agrees Rachel. "How to problem-solve, how to figure out the best way and make sure everything gets done. That's a good thing to learn early on. The earlier you learn it, the more successful you'll be."

"We've become very aware of the issues around the world through Roots & Shoots," says Talia Waxman. "Sometimes when you're living in a town like Greenwich it's easy to become ignorant about what's going on. We've really connected with people around the world."

It was Pippa Biddle's contention that

"Roots & Shoots isn't just about raising money. It's about getting the community involved. Getting to know people around the world."

—Rachel Pennella, student



the organization's main lesson is how to organize and lead. Sydney agrees wholeheartedly. "Roots & Shoots is helping mold activists for the future."

HELP CLOSE TO HOME

Of course, you don't have to leave the country to find troubled kids. Sydney is moved to recall their group's visit to Boston to discuss violence and teenagers among a mixed crowd. They wanted to share stories on how they raised money for projects.

"Somebody told us later, after we visited and told the kids how you can have a positive impact, that the kids changed. When they saw us be kind to people, they could see that one little thing could change a person's whole day. Their leaders told us, 'After you guys left, we saw little things in them that changed.' I'm not saying everyone turned into Mother Teresa, but it was the little things that impacted them, things that led to the bigger picture."

Her friend Raquel likes the reaction they're getting to the new group at GHS. "My friends know about it as being like a family, so they look at it as a positive. A lot of people are joining now because of what they've seen us go through. Kids see how our group has gone up to Boston and has been in charge of all these fun parties, they'd just like to help, I guess."

Of course, there is the requirement at Greenwich High that graduates need to put in ninety hours of community service

during their high school lives, so that makes Roots & Shoots doubly attractive. Who knew that community service could also be a blast?

While the membership at Central seems to be all female, the girls claim that some boys do belong but often get called away by sports. Raquel is determined that the GHS club will be more mixed. "We're trying to even it all out."

"I've gained a lot of maturity just being a party of this group," Raquel says. "I've gotten so comfortable speaking in public. You learn to work together, but it's not like sports, it's businesslike."

Jen Bresler has watched Raquel and Sydney for three years now, and likes the way their energy will be fanning out into the high school and whatever they do for the rest of their lives. Sydney will be visiting Haiti with a church group this summer, and has her heart set on Uganda in a few years. Lives will be touched along the way, not least her own.

Jen pauses as she watches her class full of kids break up and go off in small, laughing groups to make the late bus. "The kids have been great. They even went on the radio to talk about kids in West Africa. When I hear the kids speak in public," she says, smiling lightly, "I'm so impressed. And I realize that they've soaked up even more than I thought they had."

It's not much, of course. Just a better understanding of the big, wide world. **G**

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