

Schoolchildren join animal welfare drive

By ROY K. AKAGAWA

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For a group of sixth-graders at Seisen International School in Tokyo, the annual Festival of Nations Bazaar held on Oct. 11 was a chance to do more than simply sell raffle tickets or homemade foods and crafts from around the world.

The sixth-grade class used the crowd-drawing event to test ideas crystallized in a class brainstorming session on animal welfare.

Among their five ideas was to help with an ongoing petition drive by the Citizens Conference for Consideration of Nature and Animals to revise Japan's Law for the Protection and Control of Animals. The sixth-graders set up a table at the Seisen bazaar to collect signatures. In addition, the table displayed photos of stray cats in need of homes along with signs in a multitude of languages, reflecting the different nations from which the girls or their parents are from, and asking that people take in the cats.

According to Christine Pelc, one of the leaders of the sixth-grade class project, about 450 signatures had been collected in a single day. The group hopes to collect 10,000 signatures to help the Citizens Conference reach its goal of 200,000.

She said that some of those who signed asked her about the need for revising the law as well as about some of the animal-welfare groups organizing the petition drive, indicating a lack of general knowledge about the law in Japan concerning animals.

The petition drive is seeking to strengthen provisions of the animal protection law, which animal-welfare advocates contend does little to protect animals from abuse. Among the deficiencies in the law, according to these activists, is the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes cruelty to animals and a minimal penalty in the event an individual is found guilty of cruelty. At present, the maximum penalty is 30,000 yen.



A visitor to the Seisen International School bazaar signs a petition at the table set up by sixth graders.

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Pelc obtained a copy of a petition from Elizabeth Oliver, director of the Animal Refugee Kansai in Osaka which is one of the groups pushing for legal revisions. Pelc found out about Oliver and her group through an article in the Asahi Evening News.

The sixth-grade class originally came up with the idea of doing something for animals after Pelc's father, Gene, talked to the class about the situation facing animals in Japan. The Pelcs have on occasion had kittens abandoned on their doorstep and have been looking for new homes for those cats.

"(The girls) became very excited about the idea of doing something since they like animals," Christine Pelc said.

The 48 girls in the sixth grade then came up with five ways to deal with the animal welfare issue. In addition to the petition drive, the girls decided to raise money for people who are helping animals, to produce a pamphlet,

to publicize the issue in school through a newsletter produced in sixth grade and to find homes for the cats found at the Pelcs' home.

The 100 pamphlets on hand at the bazaar were quickly distributed to passersby and the class has also put together one in a projected series of newsletters. The fund-raising by the girls will have to await the completion of an ongoing drive for another charity that is being organized by the entire school, according to Toni Bell, one of the two sixth-grade teachers who have been helping their students in the project.

She said the class effort has been a hands-on experience at problem-solving.

"We have been treating them as adults dealing with an adult problem," Bell said.

Because the fund-raising drive cannot be started until after January, Bell said she plans to stay flexible and let the girls take the project in whatever direction and for as



Christine Pelc

long as they remain interested.

Unfortunately, no one at the Seisen bazaar offered to take in any of the abandoned cats being cared for by the Pelc family, providing the girls with a cold dose of adult reality. This poses a serious problem for Gene Pelc, as he is allergic to cats.

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