

Clicking for Kibble

Mimi Ausland's website feeds shelter cats across the country.

BY WENDY
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Mimi Ausland
volunteering
at the Humane
Society of Central Oregon

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MIMI AUSLAND

She may be only 13 years old, but Mimi Ausland of Bend, Ore., has helped to fill the hungry bellies of countless shelter cats and dogs. Through visits to her interactive websites FreeKibbleKat.com and FreeKibble.com, this inspired seventh grader has stocked 13 shelters' shelves across the United States with more than 108 tons of healthy cat and dog kibble — that's 159,104,310 pieces and counting.

Ausland says seeing those clicks transform into morsels that add up to real meals for cats and dogs is her favorite thing about what she does.

"It's great to see the kibble come to life," she says. "Usually it's just a number on the computer. It's neat to see the shelves fill up in the animal shelters, especially if they were kind of low on food. I like that part a lot."

Inspired by Rice

Ausland's inspiration for FreeKibbleKat.com, designed for cat owners, and FreeKibble.com, designed for dog owners, came from FreeRice.com, a nonprofit website run by the United Nations World Food Program that donates rice to needy countries. Visitors to FreeRice.com test their vocabulary skills, and each correct answer equals 10 grains of donated rice. The concept triggered an idea in Ausland's mind.

"My cousins and I were playing FreeRice.com, and we decided it would be really cool if I could do something like that but with cats and dogs, generating kibble off a website instead of rice," Ausland says.

Ausland and her parents started to brainstorm ideas in February 2008. On April 1, FreeKibble.com launched, followed by FreeKibbleKat.com on June 1. The sites challenge visitors to answer trivia questions about cats and dogs.

"Every day there's a new cat- or dog-related trivia question," Ausland explains. "It's A, B, C or D. You guess what you think is correct. And then right or wrong, we donate 10 pieces of kibble to one of 13 shelters across the United States."

Ausland says that many fans visit one or both

of her sites daily, thanks to the success of her e-mail reminder.

"The FreeKibble reminder is an e-mail sent out every day to remind you about the link, so you can play," she says. "More than 40,000 people are usually on the list."

Coming up with those unique trivia questions every day is no easy task, Ausland says. She enlists the help of her dad, her friends, dog and cat trivia books, and even fans of the sites.



Mimi and her dog, Aspen

Mimi was 4 years old when she adopted her Maine Coon, Dot.



"It was definitely easy at the beginning, but now it's a lot trickier," she says. "My dad and I take turns putting them in, and we get ideas from dog and cat fact books. Then some people send them in to us, and we'll use those, too."

Deciding which organizations to donate to is tricky, too, Ausland says. When she first launched the sites, she gave to her local humane society in Bend, and as her kibble count rose, she shared the bounty with shelters as far away as Florida. It didn't take long for her to begin receiving e-mails asking for help.

"So many shelters are in need of food and other resources," she says. "We now get 10 to 14 of those e-mails a day. We want to help all of them, but there's only so much kibble. So we ask them to give information about their organization and what it would mean to have this food. When they e-mail us back, that really shows us commitment and that they really do need the

Family and Friends Help

For as long as Ausland can remember, she has shared her life with animals. Besides living with a Maine Coon named Dorothy (a.k.a. Dot), a Golden Retriever named Aspen, a teddy bear hamster named Sunny, and two horses, Ausland has volunteered at the Humane Society of Central Oregon since she was 7 years old.

"I always wanted to volunteer at the Humane Society here in Bend," she says. "But I had to wait until I turned 7 years old, so that's when I started working there. I socialize the cats and clean out their litterboxes, and I groom the dogs and exercise them. I get to hang out with the animals. It's fun!"

Although this young girl with a genuine love for animals has played a huge role in amassing miniature mountains of kibble for hungry cats and dogs, Ausland credits family and friends who helped make her vision a reality. Her mother, Brooke Smith, designed the sites' colorful characters and animation. Her father, Kelly Ausland, helped design the sites' structures. A Bend-based computer programmer, Josh Martin, created the websites. And organic pet food manufacturer Castor & Pollux Pet Works in nearby Clackamas, Ore., provides the donated kibble.

Castor & Pollux recently launched a dog treat bearing Ausland's moniker: Mimi's Favorite Mac & Cheese Dog Cookies. For every box purchased, the company donates one meal to a shelter animal.

"It has been a blast making it," Ausland says, noting that her dad's homemade macaroni and cheese inspired the treat's title. "It's a one-for-one, so you buy a box, you donate one meal to a shelter animal. People love the cookies, and you can eat them, too."

A Mimi's Favorite cat treat is in the works, too. Ausland has been thinking about another "favorite food" to inspire

follow in her footsteps.

"Just do whatever you can do, whether it's doing a lemonade stand or setting up a site like this," she says. "Just get out there and help something or someone. Try your best to help." O

Assn. Communications Contest recognized her work with a Certificate of Excellence award for her CAT FANCY article, "Solutions for a Scratch-Happy Cat." She shares her Oregon home with two domestic shorthairs, two retired racing Greyhounds, a hound-pointer mix, a flock of chickens and three goats.



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