

RYE BROOK

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Members of the Wild about Wild Animals club show off posters they made depicting an endangered animal of their choice in Jane Giard's classroom at Ridge Street School on June 19.

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Advocating for endangered animals

New Ridge Street Elementary School club teaches students about endangered animals and how to be advocates

BY JAMIE KERNER

Ridge Street School teacher Jane Giard has always loved animals. Wild animals, to be exact. And through the Wild about Wild Animals club (WAWA), Giard was able to share her special interest with students while teaching them how to be advocates for endangered species.

The English as a New Language (ENL) teacher approached Ridge Street Principal Tracy Taylor with her idea of starting the club in January.

"I brought it up to my principal, she said 'great idea and how many kids do you think,'" Giard said.

The club was only offered to students in third, fourth and fifth grades. Giard had hoped to get at least five kids from each grade to sign up. However, by the WAWA club's first meeting in February, 72 kids had signed up—far exceeding her expectation.

"We had them waiting out in the hall," Giard said. "My principal had to come and help organize, it was huge."

An announcement was made on the school's loudspeaker to advertise the club and pique students' interest.

"When we heard it on the announcements, it kind of caught our eye, or our ears," third-grader Tyler Dehard said. "We just wanted to join because I really love animals and I just wanted to learn more about wild endangered animals."

"I heard it with Tyler and we both agreed we should join," third-grader Alejandro Pena added. "I don't think it's fair that wild animals should be dying just for not really doing much."

The club meetings were held in Giard's classroom during the third-, fourth- and fifth-graders' lunch and recess period. Most clubs at Ridge Street met only once a month, according to Giard. However, the WAWA club met up to five times a month.

Typical club meetings consisted of watching videos about endangered wild animals and learning how to help advocate for their survival. Students even had the opportunity to draft their own letters, acting as crusaders for these animals, which were then sent to Congress.

Beginning in March, about 20 club members began their work on what was known as the "poster project." Each student chose an endangered animal to research from the World Wildlife Endangered Species list and then created a poster about it. Each poster included fun facts about the animal, a timeline of dangers to its existence, a glossary of relevant terms and a picture.

At the conclusion of the project, students used their posters to teach their peers, teachers and parents about their endangered animal, dangers the animal faces and actions that can be taken to save it during a series of early morning presentations held on May 18 and June 14.



Third-graders Marlowe Kulla (left) and Michael Hamlet use the classroom's Smartboard to actively engage in a lesson about elephants during a Wild about Wild Animals club meeting at Ridge Street School on June 19.

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Audience members at the presentations contributed donations on a voluntary basis. According to Giard, people gave 1-, 5-, 10- and 20-dollar bills, and some kids brought in coins. Through these donations, the WAWA club raised a total of \$133. Of that, \$113 will be donated to the World Wildlife Fund, the world's leading conservation organization that works to keep the environment and wildlife safe. The other \$20 will be donated to help the endangered mustangs.

Third-grader Joshua Simkin said conducting research on the endangered animals and creating the posters was his favorite thing to do in the WAWA club.

"Once we pick one, it's so fun because then you learn so much about the animal," Simkin said. "Then you get to share it with other people and other people get to learn about the animal and they can help save that animal."

Simkin did his project on the endangered hawksbill sea turtle. He chose the sea turtles because he knows that they are dying in a lot of places.

"I want to rescue turtles so everyone who loves turtles can still love turtles," he said.

According to Giard, the kids loved being in the club, and at the end of the school year, they thanked her for creating it. Due to their continued interest, Giard said the club will start back up at Ridge Street in September.

Giard said she loves showing the kids that they can, and should, be advocates for what they think is important in the world. Empowering her students is her favorite aspect of WAWA.

"I think it's very important to teach the kids that they do have power," she said. "They do have a voice and it's important to get more advocates for our animals throughout the world."