



“Cuddle Buddies”

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THE COLD MID-AUGUST SAN FRANCISCO BAY fog was just beginning to roll in over Piedmont as I snapped the cover shut on Jennings Burch’s book “They Cage the Animals at Night,” the most recent addition to my “get ready for 7th grade summer reading extravaganza.” It is a story about a young boy who lives in various orphanages and foster homes with only his stuffed animal, Doggie, for companionship. My cousin from Connecticut had told me that it was a fabulous book, but little did I know how it would touch my life and the lives of others.

As I gazed across my room at the pile of stuffed animals I had been collecting since I was young, an idea came to me. I would collect stuffed animals for children like Jennings. First, I contacted local agencies that support children suffering from abuse and neglect and told them about my idea. They said that the stuffed animals would be very helpful in therapy and would certainly lift children’s spirits.

I decided to call my project “Cuddle Buddies.” Now I actually had to come up with the “buddies”! I wrote articles for the local and school newspapers, telling Jennings’ story and asking for donations of stuffed animals. My phone rang off the hook; schools, families, local businesses and toy manufacturers all wanted to help. Much to my delight this project took the Bay Area by storm. By the second week my living room looked like a zoo with animals tucked in every corner and on top of each chair. Every time my mom and I made deliveries to the agencies, the kids would be waiting for their Cuddle Buddies with their eyes down, too shy to look but shaking with excitement.

Six years after its launch, Cuddle Buddies continues to expand. Each year I solicit from more toy companies and communities. Now over 25,000 stuffed animals have been donated to agencies in the Bay Area and Connecticut, emergency units, two orphanages in Africa and one in Germany. At the Saidia Children’s Home in Kenya, Simon, a seven year old, whose parents died from AIDS, couldn’t sleep at night. When the Cuddle Buddies were laid out for him to choose from, Simon selected a grey koala bear and soon after was sleeping through the night. My heart ached when I learned that a young girl in Oakland had stopped cutting herself so she could get the big black



dog that she wanted so badly. I never dreamed that Cuddle Buddies would be used in these ways.

Knowing that I would be going on to college and that others my age could do what I have done, I decided to expand Cuddle Buddies. To spread the word beyond the Bay Area I designed a website, www.cuddlebuddies.net, and contacted newspapers and TV stations across the nation. The response was overwhelming. I heard from kids, parents, agencies and even The Girls Scouts. I am now helping to establish two dozen Cuddle Buddies chapters from Utah to North Carolina.

This has been a great experience. I have learned how to follow through on an idea, how to champion a cause and how to deal with setbacks. But most importantly, I have learned how easy it is to positively impact a life and the joy that comes from it. I will go to college with these lessons in mind and hope to continue my work with Cuddle Buddies, even as I engage in a whole new set of exciting academic and nonacademic pursuits.

ANALYSIS

“Cuddle Buddies” chronicles Anastasia’s leading role in the development of a social enterprise. This story is probably compelling for admissions officers at Stanford, where there is a growing interest in social entrepreneurship. Anastasia’s impressive story demonstrates her creativity and commitment to growing a vision, a valuable asset as a leader in whatever “exciting academic and nonacademic pursuits” lie ahead for her.

The introduction draws us in with its careful attention to detail: we can see the San Francisco fog, sense its chilliness, and witness Anastasia’s passion for reading. The last sentence, “little did I know how it would touch my life and the lives of others,” foreshadows the creation of Cuddle Buddies. What is particularly remarkable about this story is Anastasia’s young age—she is only in 7th grade. It is quite a dramatic jump from the small scene in the book, *They Cage the Animals at Night*, and the decision to provide animals for therapy. Anastasia could have added a few more sentences to explain how she started the ball rolling on her project. In particular, it is surprising that she contacted local agencies—here it may help to specify which ones—as one imagines that most teenagers might simply tell their friends an idea and never actually act to make the vision a reality.

The third paragraph uses vivid imagery and active language to make the reader feel a part of the creation and expansion of “Cuddle Buddies.” Anastasia does an excellent job of using lively phrases so