

Students learn about plight of racing greyhounds

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HAMPTON — A group of fourth-grade students at Sacred Heart School had the opportunity on recently to live like a greyhound racing dog confined in an imaginary steel crate as part of a presentation by Grey2K USA.

The nonprofit rescue organization stopped by the school to teach students in Janet Gillman's fourth-grade class about the lives led by greyhounds who belong to racetracks.

"A lot of people don't think of greyhounds as real dogs," said Grey2K USA volunteer Lorraine Nicotera. "They think they are just a way to make money. They spend about 20 hours a day in cages, and have four hours a day to stretch their legs or race. Unfortunately, a lot of people don't think they are dogs, but racing machines."

After selecting two student volunteers, Nicotera measured out two mats the same size as the cages would be where greyhounds live most of their lives — 43 inches by 34 inches by 30 inches. The students had to scrunch up to be able to fit in the space.

"I was surprised to learn how cruel they are to the greyhounds," said fourth-grade student Katia Gaffney. "I didn't realize how often they hurt themselves racing, or that they spend their lives in cages."

Another student agreed with Gaffney.

"I didn't know they started racing the dogs so young," said fourth-grade student Luke Grella, who owns a cocker spaniel named Maggie. "It doesn't seem fair to the dogs."

While Nicotera spoke, Zoe, the rescued greyhound who belongs to Christine Dorchak, president of the organization, sat curled up on a dog bed in the corner of the room.

Students watched a movie about the legislative changes in dog racing over the past couple of years. In April 2010, the Greyhound Protection Act was passed by the New Hampshire Senate. As a result, New Hampshire no longer permits greyhound racing.

However, those interested in the sport can still view simulcast of the events at Seabrook Park, formerly Seabrook Greyhound Park. It is still legal to race dogs in seven states — Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Texas and West Virginia.

According to the video they showed, studies found that over 1,000 dogs were injured or even died every year in New Hampshire as a result of greyhound racing at multiple tracks.

Students had an opportunity to ask questions following the presentation. They asked why the dogs are kept in cages (because the race tracks have a lot of dogs and it's easier for the people to keep track of them); why they are muzzled (because often dogs are not happy and an unhappy dog is more likely to bite); and the number of dogs racing.

"It's an average of 1,000 to keep any track open at any time," said Dorchak. "Since there are 22 tracks remaining open, that means there are about 22,000 dogs already racing, not including those being bred to race at the breeding farms."

Gillman invited Grey2K USA to her class as she's long been a supporter of that program, and has owned three greyhounds so far — Piggy, Spring and Notion.

She originally got involved after she dined with a friend at Seabrook Greyhound Park and asked about what happened to the dogs that didn't win.

She and her friend, Linda Nordstrom, decided to help find homes for those dogs and as a result, REGAP (Retired Greyhounds as Pets) was created. After Seabrook closed the dog-racing part of its operation, she signed on with Grey2K USA.

"The most rewarding part of having a greyhound as a family pet is just that — she was family," Gillman said. "They traveled everywhere with me. Two of them worked tirelessly on abolishing racing in Massachusetts and New Hampshire by standing at the voting polls. They are the smartest dogs and the reason I say this is because they learn about life outside of a cage very quickly."

"I always felt strongly about the fact that greyhounds knew they were given a second chance at life and that is why they are so good in homes. They want you to know they are loving and gentle dogs and they are grateful you gave them another chance. The look on their faces tells you they are happy to be with you," she added.

Dorchak said she hopes someday for greyhound racing to be outlawed in all states.

"I wish for everyone here to adopt a greyhound if they're thinking of adopting a dog, and I'd like all of you to share what you've learned about greyhounds and racing with your families and friends."

For information, visit www.grey2kusa.org/index.html.