

Field Trip

BY JAMES HETTINGER

Animal Kind International

Headquartered in: Jemez Springs, New Mexico

Established: July 2007

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Resources: Animal Kind International (AKI) is run by founder Karen Menczer, a natural resources consultant who serves as the nonprofit's unpaid director. Funded by individual donations, AKI raised about \$5,000 in its first year and a half of existence. The money is distributed to animal welfare organizations in developing countries.

She may make her home in New Mexico, but as a natural resources consultant, Karen Menczer has traveled the world, working in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.

As a longtime animal lover and animal welfare volunteer, she doesn't always like what she finds.

The concept of basic kindness to animals is lacking in several of the countries where she's worked, Menczer says. In Uganda, where she lived for five years, she saw people train guard dogs by confining them to small wooden crates all day. Sometimes, there would be a rumor that a dog was rabid—or even that a dog was a witch—and the locals would abuse the animal out of fear. In Armenia, Bosnia, and Bulgaria, dogs wander around starving in the cold, and no one thinks of feeding them.

And yet, Menczer sees sparks of hope—signs that people in developing countries are becoming more aware of humane issues.

"I've seen it in Uganda, where people just see models of somebody being kind to an animal and then they say, 'Ah, there's something to this. It's nice to be



Vendors in Ghana wash a puppy available for sale. The U.S.-based Animal Kind International supports animal welfare organizations in developing countries, including the Ghana Society for the Protection and Care of Animals, which helps educate vendors through courses in animal care.



Officials from the Uganda Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (USPCA) visit a local who has received the group's help with vaccinations and guidance on animal care. Pictured are USPCA veterinarian Berna Nakanwagi, left, and Ibra Nsereko, center, who was a USPCA field officer at the time. USPCA is supported by Animal Kind International.

kind to an animal, and there's nothing wrong with it," she says. "... There's a change happening, I think."

During a recent stint in Armenia, for example, Menczer met a woman who had started an animal shelter, and someone else who'd initiated a spay/neuter program for street dogs. Animal welfare champions are scattered throughout developing countries, Menczer says, but they don't have much money and are often terribly isolated.

To help remedy that situation, Menczer founded Animal Kind International (AKI) nearly two years ago. The nonprofit is essentially a network of animal welfare organizations and individuals that Menczer has met and volunteered for during her overseas work assignments. AKI funnels financial contributions (as well as pet magazines, towels, and other supplies) to the overseas organizations. All the money goes directly to the groups to help them continue their work as they see fit, Menczer says.

“We’re not trying to take them in other directions,” she explains. “We know these organizations, we know the people are good, we know what they’re doing is worthwhile. So we just want to be supporting what they think is the best way to move animal welfare forward in their country.”

AKI works with animal welfare organizations and individuals in Uganda, Ghana, Southern Sudan, Botswana, and Namibia in Africa, as well as in Honduras, Jamaica, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some of the organizations run shelters, while others have no facility at all, Menczer says. Contributors may direct their money to a certain organization or ask that it go where it’s most needed.

“In these countries it’s really difficult to raise money for animal welfare,” Menczer says. Typically, the governments don’t fund animal welfare programs, and if citizens can afford to make charitable contributions, the money goes toward people, not animals, she explains. AKI aims to fill that fundraising gap by providing an outlet for U.S. citizens interested in contributing to animal welfare organizations overseas.

“Every cent is helping those poor animals,” adds Erika von Gierszewski of Windhoek, Namibia, who struck up a friendship with Menczer when they both volunteered at the Windhoek SPCA. Von Gierszewski had heard from friends and newspaper articles that rural SPCAs in the region were “really struggling to raise funds,” so she started fundraising by selling secondhand clothing, needlework, coffee, and cake. Her efforts were boosted by AKI money, which five local SPCAs have used to buy food, blankets, and bowls, von Gierszewski says.

AKI also offers moral support to people who can easily feel like they’re alone, Menczer says. She gets to deliver good news to people like Pilar Thorne, who’s working to improve animal welfare in Honduras. “When I get a \$100 donation I say, ‘Hi, Pilar. Somebody just donated \$100 to your organization.’ That lifts her up.”

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