

DIGEST

You've got an 'Elefriend' in these New Roads High students

For all those people who think teenagers typically preoccupy themselves with staying in style and hanging with the in-crowd, take a look at a club of animal rights activists at the private New Roads High School in Santa Monica.

The club of about 20 students, who calls itself "Elefriends," meets Thursdays at lunchtime with teacher and veteran animal rights advocate Melya Kaplan.

The students already have impressive credits in their campaign against animal abuse. They recently visited Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti, and say they persuaded him to launch an investigation into alleged mistreatment of African elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo.

"We're trying to bring awareness to issues that are covered up," sophomore Ashley Loggins said. "If a child is injured or abused, that makes the news. But if an animal is injured or abused, you never see that in the papers."

Said 14-year-old Rachael Stern, "Just because animals don't speak doesn't mean that we can abuse them. We don't really want to hurt the zoo; we just want to help the elephants."

"We are not kids," said Albert Hutchison Jr., 15. "We are young adults [and] we're here to better the conditions of animals."

Hutchison got involved with the animal group as a form of what he calls "redemption" for childhood sins,

he said.

"I find this as an outlet, to redeem myself for things that I have done in the past, when I was a little kid beating up on others... and on animals," he said. "This is my way of saying, 'I'm sorry.'"

Kaplan is a former ethics teacher from the Crossroads School, New Roads' sister school. She also taught an animal education class last year at New Roads, and said that the class was eventually redesigned as the extracurricular Elefriends club.

Donations to the Elefriends can be made by calling the nonprofit Venice Animal Allies, which Kaplan directs, at 392-5153.

— Erica Zeitlin