

## DAILY NEWS

### LIVING

# Long Island middle schoolers win national video contest to promote kindness to shelter animals

'Everybody Needs a Friend' PSA earns Port Washington kids \$10,000 prize

BY [AMY SACKS](#) / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2012, 9:36 PM



NORTH SHORE ANIMAL LEAGUE

Students and teachers from Weber Middle School in Port Washington, L.I., celebrate after winning video contest.

A group of budding young filmmakers have pawed the top prize in a national video contest to promote kindness to shelter animals.

Nine seventh-graders from Carrie Palmer Weber Middle School, in Port Washington, L.I., shrieked and jumped with joy last week after learning they had won an eye-popping \$10,000 for their public service announcement, "[Everybody Needs a Friend.](#)"

"I never thought it would turn into something this big," said Steven Russo, 12, who stars in the two-minute film about a bullied boy who comes to identify with a downtrodden stray dog he finds hanging around his school yard.

The Mutt-i-gree's "American Adopts" contest, sponsored by the North Shore Animal League and the Cesar Millan Foundation, called for submissions of a two-minute PSA that shows why a person should adopt a shelter animal instead of buying from a pet store.

A few months ago, the school's technology education teachers, Daniel Ciccone and Tom Stepanek, sprang into action after spotting the contest flyer only a week before the submission deadline.

"We just started brainstorming and asking the kids for ideas," said Ciccone, who shares his daily lunch hours with the group of five boys and four girls who enjoy hanging out in the media room.

"We asked the kids what they would feel like if they were an animal all alone and didn't have any friends," Ciccone said. "One of the kids said, 'It's the same kind of feeling kids have when they feel bullied and bad.'"

The group decided to run with the idea of mirroring two stories, one of a lost dog and one of a bullied boy going through his day. In the end, they find companionship with each other.

They shot the film during two lunch breaks and two half-hour after school sessions. Then the ambitious team spent a day in the editing room and submitted the video on deadline.

Despite their hard work, the creative students were shocked to learn they had actually won out of 33 submissions from across the country.

"I was blown away! I thought I was dreaming but I wasn't. I felt so, so proud of myself and everyone else," said Sahari Interiano, 12, who played the role of a girl feeling sad as she watched her friend being bullied at school.

Sahari doesn't have any pets, but when her parents finally allow her to get one she hopes to adopt. Still, participating in the project taught her a great lesson.

"I learned that everyone needs a friend no matter if it's a dog or a person," she said.

Steven agrees, and says he finds inspiration from his rescue cat, Kiwi.

"She's like a friend and makes me feel happy," he said.

The newfound video star hopes that everyone will consider adopting a pet.

"Even if you're not an animal person you can grow to be one," Steven said.

On Monday, Millan will visit the 800-student school to present the oversize check.

The money will be used to start a school video program that focuses on life skills that kids can incorporate into their careers.

On Monday night, Steven Russo and his teachers will head to Manhattan to walk the red carpet at the North Shore Animal League's Dogcatamy Awards at the Waldorf-Astoria, where their video will be screened.

"I'm very excited," said Steven, who will bring his dad.

Another inspiring teen will also get to attend the dazzling event.

Sofia Anunziata, the Brooklyn teen profiled by the Daily News a few weeks ago for her work with shelter animals, was invited by the Cesar Millan foundation to sit next to the famed dog trainer at the star-studded gala.

Her mom, Christine, is excited beyond belief.

"OMG," she wrote in an email. "It's one of the perks of being a mom."

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