

BELCHER'S CAMPAIGN
Written for Hearts United for Animals
by Allison Hunter-Frederick © 2008

Cast of Characters:

Belcher: a red-legged California frog

Incognito: a mouse born with a deformed leg

Sprinter: a hamster

Grandma Greta: a retired classroom guinea pig who is frail and almost blind

Iggy: an iguana

Pedro: a Chihuahua

Act I

BELCHER (yelling from below stage): I want to start a campaign!

IGGY (sleeping): Z-z-z-z.

SPRINTER (racing across stage): No time! Can't stop! Preparing for a marathon!

INCOGNITO (speaking quietly from corner): I'll help.

BELCHER (bounding on stage with papers): Did anyone hear me? Did anyone answer? I need everyone's help!

(Belcher pauses. He shuffles impatiently from one leg to another. He flicks through his papers.)
Sprinter continues to run laps around the stage, but waves a paw to indicate that he heard.)

INCOGNITO (shaking Iggy): Iggy, wake up!

BELCHER (clearing his throat): Here are my facts. (Hands out information sheets to each animal.) Let's practice them. I have the first fact. Did you know that my species, the California red-legged frog was once found all the way from the coast to the Sierra Nevada Mountains but today has almost disappeared?

(Sprinter grabs sheet but continues to run while he hurriedly reads.)

SPRINTER: Did you know that frogs need their bodies to have the same temperature as the environment?

(Belcher bangs into Iggy to wake him and then thrusts sheet into face.)

IGGY (yawning and speaking in a daze): Red-legged frogs are in decline.

BELCHER (taking paper and slapping it over Iggy's head): I already read that fact! You have a different one. (Shakes paper in clenched toes and then hands to Iggy.) Look at your paper.

IGGY (blinking and still speaking in a daze): Did you know frogs are able to live 5 to 15 years?

(Belcher turns expectedly to Incognito.)

INCOGNITO: I thought ... you wa-wanted us to ... help with a ca-campaign?

BELCHER: Sure do! What's the issue?

INCOGNITO (stammering and looking at floor): Th-that's my po-point. You-ou don't have an is-issue. Wh-what idea you do want to con-convey?

BELCHER (rolls eyes and hands): Information about frogs.

INCOGNITO: Ca-campaigns are a-about is-issues.

IGGY (snapping out of sleep): What's the issue?

BELCHER: The issue is.... (Belcher hesitates. He shuffles awkwardly from one leg to another. He scans through his papers and mutters facts to himself.) The issue is....

SPRINTER (pausing and waving hands): Hey, hey, hey, why are we always talking about frogs? Why not talk about animal health? (Puts paws on hips.) Did you know I run two miles everyday?

ANIMALS (groaning): Yes, we do!

SPRINTER (swallowing): Oh. Well, then why do all of you have such fat bellies?

(Grandma Greta arrives. With her is a dog. He is helping her walk. When he sees the animals, he starts to growl and bark.)

BELCHER (puffing up): No one growls at me. The red-legged frogs are being driven out of California. We will NOT be driven out of animal shelters too!

GRANDMA: Belcher, no one wants to drive you away. Pedro is just scared. Perhaps, if he tells you his story, you'll understand why he feels a need to protect himself. How about it, Pedro?

IGGY: Mean dog has a story? What's his story?

PEDRO (bristling): I am not scared! I am tougher than anyone here.

BELCHER (clenching front toes): I could beat you up.

GRANDMA: Pedro, you are not being kind to my friends.

PEDRO: No one has been kind to me!

GRANDMA (gently reproaching): Haven't I? Hasn't my mistress?

INCOGNITO (whispering): We'd be ki-kind to you, if-if you'd let us.

SPRINTER (running up to group): Hey Grandma Greta, nice to see you! Who's the new guy? (Darts off again.) No time to talk! Preparing for a marathon!

(Pedro growls and lunges after Sprinter, who exits to the back of the stage and then races back on stage to hide behind Grandma Greta. All the other animals tuck themselves behind her too. Grandma grabs hold of Pedro's front paw and then turns around with him to face the other animals. They step back a few steps. She speaks calmly but firmly to them.)

GRANDMA: Nice to have everyone here! (All animals look at Grandma to listen, but also nervously eye Pedro.) As you might recall, my mistress helped rescue some dogs from a puppy mill. Today I want to introduce one of them to you. (Points to Pedro with free hand.) Everyone this is Pedro.

(Pedro glowers. The animals avoid eye contact with him. Then Incognito timidly creeps forward.)

INCOGNITO: I'm Incognito. Y-you sc-scare me, bu-but I'll be yo-your friend if you l-let me.

BELCHER (eyeing Pedro): Grandma says you have a reason to be scared. Well, Pedro, you know what? It's okay to be scared. All of us here get scared too. I get scared that my species will disappear from California, and that no one will know how to care for me, and then what will happen to me? ... You just can't go around attacking everyone from fear.

SPRINTER (hanging back): I get scared I won't get to run in a marathon. Hamsters just live to be two years old. That doesn't give me much time to prepare.

GRANDMA: I get scared of old age. I already can't walk or see without help. (Turns to Pedro.) And Pedro, Belcher is right. You'll make more friends if you're nice to those you meet.

IGGY: Pedro is scared? Me too. I get scared someone will injure my tail when picking me up. (Stares at Pedro.) Why are you scared?

PEDRO (shuffling feet and mumbling): I'm scared this will be a puppy mill.

GRANDMA: Maybe a tour of the place will help?

(Grandma grasps Pedro's paw again and shuffles towards stage exit. The other animals look at each other. Incognito darts forward and offers support to Grandma for her other side. The others follow more slowly behind.)

ACT II

(Animals return to the stage. They're eating food. Animals finish their food except Pedro, who keeps food clenched in a paw. When Pedro stops, animals pause too and congregate.)

PEDRO (stopping): Grandma, who else will get caged with me?

GRANDMA: My mistress said that for now you will get caged alone but of course near the other small dogs. The shelter keepers want you to get comfortable here, before they try you with others.

PEDRO: You mean at first I'll have my own cage ... and my own food ... and my own water ... and my own blanket?

GRANDMA (nodding and smiling): You'll even have your own toys.

PEDRO (scowling): Then how many dogs will get put with me?

GRANDMA: Oh, no one else will go in that cage with you. It's a cage for single dogs.

PEDRO (scratching head): But.... it's bigger than the one my family had at the puppy mill. There, we all shared a cage. We rarely had a blanket. And I don't think any dog had toys.

SPRINTER (spreading arms wide and exclaiming): What did you have? I have a wheel. I have a tube. I have a chewing block. I have toilet paper to rip. I have bedding and.... (Falls to ground on back. Looks upward and stretches arms.) I have so many things!

IGGY (wagging tail and beaming): My cage will be big when I grow up. It'll have to be—I'll be eight feet long!

SPRINTER (jumping up and racing off): Nice to meet you! Got to go! Marathon won't wait!

GRANDMA (reassuring): Pedro, when you're ready, I think there were a couple older dogs whom the shelter keepers thought might make good companions for you. You'll get moved into their kennel, which is a bigger one. You'll all have separate bowls, blankets, and toys. And you'll all have a dog door that will allow everyone of you to go outside or come inside when you like.

PEDRO (turning sad): My family might have liked this place. Our cage was so much smaller than mine here. Whenever we moved, we'd bump into someone. Sometimes we saw dogs just tied outside all year, even during storms. All of us got easily sick.

BELCHER: My mom DID like this place. Before she was rescued, she just got kept in a bucket. She got kept in it during the wet weather, the hot weather—any kind of weather. She was sick when she got rescued and brought here to the shelter. The keepers gave her an aquarium.

(Sprinter races by again.)

BELCHER (yelling after him): Hey Sprinter, would you get me more food?

(Sprinter continues to run laps around the stage, but waves a paw to indicate that he will oblige.)

BELCHER: Hey, Pedro, do you want more food? (Spies food still beside Pedro.) Or aren't you hungry? Or do you want something different to eat?

PEDRO (shrugging): I want to keep it for when I'm really hungry.

IGGY (yawning): I'm hungry! (Wanders and chants.) Hungry, hungry, iguana!

(Sprinter returns with a fistful of food that he flings at Belcher.)

SPRINTER (jogging in spot): Would anyone else like food?

IGGY (laying down): Yes, please.

BELCHER (nodding and pointing at Pedro): Bring food for him. (Sprinter waves hand, before taking off again.) And you Pedro, EAT!

PEDRO (scratching his head): I can get more food? At the puppy mill, my family all had to share our bowl of food and of water. We fought over the food every day. There was never enough and our dishes didn't get refilled until at least the next day.

BELCHER (hopping next to Pedro): A boy bought my mom from a store. No one there told him how to care for her. He kept her in a bucket and thought she could catch flies from there. And he thought the flies would be enough food for her.

PEDRO (scowling): I hated my owners. Except for when they fed us, seeing humans usually meant bad news. It meant they were going to breed another mom. Or it meant they were going to ship a truckload of puppies to a store. There were puppies that died in those shipments. We never knew why they died, but just knew we were scared of trucks and stores.

(Sprinter returns with food. He sits holding it. He also nudges Iggy who has gone to sleep, but then motions him to be quiet when he wakes.)

GRANDMA: My mistress says that the trucks overheat. She also says the puppies don't always get enough food or water for their trip and so don't survive.

BELCHER (clearing his throat): Pedro, what happened to your mom?

(Pedro looks away, quivers, and takes several deep breaths. The others stay silent. When Pedro does speak, he avoids looking at anyone.)

PEDRO: My mom was scared she'd end up like some of the other mothers after they stopped being bred. They used to circle their cages and pace back and forth from loneliness and never did talk to any of us again. She missed her friends, but didn't want to be like them.

(Pedro hesitates. Belcher edges closer to him.)

BELCHER: A neighbor rescued my mom and brought her here to the shelter, but by then....

PEDRO (looking at Belcher): My dad, one day he heard the owners talking about her. Sometimes they don't keep females who can't breed. They kill them. My dad, he said.... they had decided not to keep my mom.

BELCHER (bounding multiple times into the air): This is why we need a campaign!

IGGY (blinking and speaking in a daze): A campaign? What about? Health?

ANIMALS (glaring at him and shouting): No!

SPRINTER: A campaign about puppy mills, right, Belcher?

(Belcher nods. Other animals all murmur consent except Pedro. He slips away from the group.)

BELCHER (hopping after him): How about it, Pedro? What do you think of a campaign against puppy mills?

PEDRO (voice shaking): My family would have liked this shelter. I know they would have. Probably every dog at the mill would like to live here. If a campaign would improve their lives, we should hold one.

BELCHER (turning to others): Okay, everyone, go get information about puppy mills! Then meet back here with your facts.

ACT III

BELCHER (yelling as he hops onto stage): Who has facts to share?

SPRINTER (racing onto stage) I do! I do!

(Sprinter jogs in place while waiting for others to reappear. Grandma follows with Pedro and Incognito on either side. Iggy trails, sometimes stopping for no apparent reason.)

SPRINTER (waving his paws energetically): Everyone ready? (Animals nod. Sprinter takes deep breath.) Well, dogs that come from puppy mills often aren't in good health. They don't get their annual vaccination. Operators of puppy mills want to spend as little money as they can. Also, the dogs often get put in small places and that can lead to fights. They....

IGGY (interrupting): Fight? Did Pedro get into a fight?

BELCHER (shoving his face at him): No, Iggy, he didn't! Now, pay attention!

IGGY (lowering self to ground and looking repentant): What did I miss?

SPRINTER (racing off stage again): Just my dust!

BELCHER: We're sharing our facts about puppy mills. Do you have one?

IGGY (rising to full stature): Sure do! Iguanas are wild animals. But if we get regularly handled, we can be tamed.

BELCHER (groaning): Iggy, we need facts about dogs and puppy mills! (Whirls to face others): Incognito, what did you find out?

IGGY (ignoring Belcher and talking louder): Dogs need positive touch too. Dogs in puppy mills usually don't get touched. And then they don't get along with people.

(Belcher looks back at Iggy with a smile. Iggy wags his tail and saunters.)

GRANDMA: Iggy, I liked your fact. Actually, my mistress has told me that the shelter keepers will need to socialize Pedro with humans and animals, before he is ready for adoption. (Smiles at Pedro) Pedro will get a whole lot of love while he is here! Then someone will adopt him and of course will also give him a whole love of love.

(Pedro sits, clasps front paws together, and gives a quick wag of his tail.)

INCOGNITO: My fact is that almost 65% of all households have pets.

GRANDMA (nodding): Did you know the desire by people to have dogs as pets as companions led to the rise of puppy mills? I didn't know until I heard my mistress talking with other shelter keepers. Now sadly there are millions of dogs in shelters.

BELCHER (bowing): Thanks everyone for your facts. Now let's practice them!

PEDRO (pulling away from group and scowling): That's it? Shouldn't there be more? I mean it's nice that you're all so much more aware of what happens at a puppy mill, but how does that help anyone? You're all already being nice to me. But, there are still dogs in mills. Your facts aren't going to help them!

GRANDMA: You're right, Pedro. Our information is meaningless if we don't encourage action.

INCOGNITO: Well, Grandma, what can people do?

PEDRO (rolls eyes and paws): How about get puppy mills closed?

SPRINTER (flopping down in front of group to listen): But how?

BELCHER (clearing throat): Seems to me that when people go to stores, they just browse and shop rather than thinking about what pet they want. Maybe we need them to change their attitude. Even though I'd like to return to California, I know our keepers will ensure that whoever adopts me will know how to properly care for me--that's more than store owners did for my mom.

IGGY: Think first! Then get!

BELCHER: Exactly Iggy.

INCOGNITO: Do-do you th-ink stores are part of the pr-problem?

(Everyone looks at Incognito. He shyly pulls back. No one else talks.)

BELCHER: Incognito, what do you want to say? (Encourages) We really want to know.

INCOGNITO (stammering and looking at floor): Be-belcher, you said your m-mom got sold in a st-store but no one pro-provided in-information ab-about her care. Pe-dro, you said st-stores buy from pu-puppy mills, but that pu-puppies some-sometimes die before they ar-arrive? (Takes a deep breath, before looking directly at attentive group.) Shouldn't we encourage people to get dogs somewhere other than stores?

GRANDMA (nodding): My mistress says that if people stopped buying dogs from stores, puppy mills would go out of business. Even when stores try to avoid puppy mills, they still might end up supporting them by purchasing puppies from a broker who is buying from puppy mills.

IGGY (stomping foot): Don't shop!

GRANDMA (putting paw to chin and sighing): I don't know if that is the answer. My mistress got her dog from a breeder and seems happy with her choice. Breeders ensure that their puppies get their shots and are socialized before they are adopted. Breeders also screen potential buyers to ensure that their dogs are going to a good home.

SPRINTER (jumping up): So.... should we encourage people to get dogs from reputable and humane breeders or from shelters, and not from stores?

(Animals look at each other and then all murmur consent.)

BELCHER (bounding multiple times into air): That's our campaign! That's our campaign! (Stops jumping and turns to animals.) Okay, let's practice. First we'll chant our slogan. Then we'll give our facts. And then we'll present solutions.

ANIMALS (chanting): Stop puppy mills!

CURRICULUM IDEAS:

1. Survey your classmates to find out what pets they own and what their fears are. Write a story about a night of fears for some of those animals. Suggested reading: Bunnacula.

2. Create a chart that lists pets your classmates own and what types of homes they have. Determine the average home for each type of pet. Prepare a diagram comparing the sizes of each different type of pet.
3. Create a chart listing pets your classmates own and what their sizes (in weight and length) are. Calculate the average size of each type of pet. Prepare a diagram comparing the sizes of each different type of pet.
4. Pick an exotic pet and determine the best care for it. Interview a vet to confirm your facts. Then create an informational brochure.
5. What is a campaign? Why do they exist? How does one prepare? Find out the answers to these questions. Then prepare your campaign about animals. Be sure to focus on an issue!
6. Research puppy mills. Determine one action that the government could take to prevent abuse at puppy mills. Write a letter to political representatives and present this action.

PLAY EXTENSIONS:

1. Using the descriptions provided from HUA of the six featured characters, rewrite the second half of the play.
2. Interview a worker at a pet store and at a shelter and (if possible) a breeder. Ask them how they would stop puppy mills. Based on their answers, rewrite the second half of the play.
3. Some dogs who come from puppy mills are withdrawn instead of aggressive in nature. In this play, Pedro attacks the animals. Rewrite the play and instead have him run from the animals.