

2015 The Humane League Site Visit: Leafleting and Meeting with Board Members

Allison Smith, ACE's Director of Research, visited The Humane League's Philadelphia office on September 10, 2015, to observe daily operations and speak with staff and board members.

Leafleting

THL planned to leaflet at Community College of Philadelphia from 10am-2pm. Rachel expected to leave from the office at 9:30 with two interns and 1100 leaflets and meet one volunteer at the campus.

On the morning of the 10th it was raining and Rachel was slightly late into the office. Although the rain had stopped as the time to depart arrived, Rachel was concerned about leafleting in the rain and considered cancelling the leafleting event. She decided to proceed in hopes of finding an overhang or sheltered area to leaflet in; she'd never leafleted at CCP before and didn't know whether this would work.

Rachel took funds from the petty cash box for subway tokens for me and the interns (Molly and Michaela); she herself had a transit pass. When we arrived at the CCP subway stop, it was raining heavily. We continued on to the leafleting site in hopes of finding an overhang on campus. There was an overhang on the block where THL had planned to leaflet, under a skybridge from the building on one side of the street to the building on the other side, so Rachel set up to leaflet on the less busy side and sent Molly and Michaela to work together on the other side of the street. They started handing out leaflets at around 10:10 am.

I began observing from the steps up to the building on the side of the street where Rachel was working. Because of the cars on the street, I was not able to observe both sidewalks at once.

During low-medium traffic times, I was able to watch the flow of foot traffic in all directions in the area Rachel was working in and tabulate the percentage of people through the area who either were handed a leaflet by Rachel or were already visibly carrying one (received earlier from Rachel or before crossing the street from Molly or Michaela). After we arrived and before the flow of traffic got too high for me to track each person through the area, I counted 64 people through the area, of whom 41, or 64%, were visibly carrying leaflets when they left. (Some others may have already received a leaflet and told Rachel this; I wasn't close enough to hear most of her conversations.)

The area Rachel was standing was at the foot of the stairs into the college library; people passed along the sidewalk parallel to the road and the library building, crossed the street or entered/exited cars, and entered/exited the library either by the stairs or by the ramp, which connected to the sidewalk near the edge of the overhang. Rachel was in a good position to reach most people traveling along the sidewalk or entering the library via the stairs, but tended to miss people using the ramp. When the volunteer, Deloris, arrived at 10:37, Rachel asked her to leaflet at the foot of the ramp.

After people were flowing through the area at a faster rate, I started watching the people who had leaflets as they came up the stairs to the library, to see whether they would throw them away in the trash cans outside the library doors. I expected that some would do so, but I watched 40 consecutive people enter the library with a leaflet without seeing one place a leaflet in the trash can, although I saw one place a leaflet on the trash can while generally rearranging his belongings and throwing other things away.

Next, I started taking timed samples of the number of leaflets people handed out over a 5 minute period.

- Between 11:00 and 11:05, Rachel handed out 34 leaflets.
- Between 11:10 and 11:15, Deloris handed out 9 leaflets.
- Between 11:15 and 11:20, Michaela handed out 29 leaflets.
- Between 11:20 and 11:25, Molly handed out 4 leaflets. This was not a fair sample, as it turned out, because after these were handed out no one had any more leaflets left and the leafleting was over; it's likely that Molly was also not trying as hard to hand out her last few leaflets as she had earlier.

Obviously, the 5 minute samples, even excluding Molly's, were not perfect representations of each person's leafleting practice over the entire event, since the rate at which leaflets are handed out depends on external factors like the flow of traffic, or whether more leaflets are needed. (In addition to Molly, Deloris and Michaela replenished their leaflet stacks while I was watching them.) However, in aggregate they match the overall pace of leafleting surprisingly well: the whole team handed out 1000 leaflets in 1.25 hours, or 800 leaflets per hour with 3-4 people participating (since Deloris arrived later than the others). Their combined rate over the sample period was 876 leaflets per hour with 4 people working.

While returning from the event I saw 1 or 2 leaflets on the ground between the area we leafleted and the subway and two inside the subway station. Of course more would have been discarded in other directions.

Rachel, who worked last year as a touring leafleter for Vegan Outreach, was very impressed by the take rate and the interest students at CCP showed in the leaflets. She planned to return the next Thursday with a larger number of leaflets for another session, although only 100 fewer leaflets had been distributed than was her initial goal for CCP for the semester.

Interns and Volunteers

Rachel told me that Philadelphia uses more interns and volunteers than other THL offices, because the physical office space and longer local history make this easier. However, other THL offices also run similar volunteer and intern programs, both to build community and to get field work done.

When I arrived at the office for my visit there were already two interns, Molly and

Michaela, in the office. Rachel arrived a few minutes later. Rachel said that over the summer the Philadelphia office had had nine interns; Molly and Michaela were the last of that group. Both Molly and Michaela were finishing up 6 month internships that they were doing as part of the co-op program at Drexel University, which requires that students take up to 3 6-month internships or co-op jobs during their time at school, depending on their field of study. Rachel was in the process of interviewing potential interns for the fall semester.

Rachel said that interns in the past had sometimes done poor work if they were not very committed to THL's mission, such as throwing away stacks of leaflets instead of handing them out. Now THL is more selective about the interns that they accept, in order to avoid similar problems. Interns and volunteers are still given significant amounts of responsibility and independence. For instance, Molly and Michaela had keys to the Philadelphia office space, as do some volunteers. Additionally, both volunteers and interns work independently in situations where they are representing THL, which I will discuss more below.

Rachel, Lydia, and Harish each emphasized that volunteers and interns are a crucial part of the THL team. They do a lot of the daily work of the organization, and THL office directors are careful to help them feel ownership over their work and that they are personally valuable to the organization. For instance, when Deloris told Rachel she'd recently gone vegetarian, Rachel offered to buy her lunch out of her personal money, explaining that Rachel Atcheson had done the same for her when she was a volunteer. Rachel also individually emails everyone who signs up to volunteer with THL at tabling events, suggesting a few events happening very soon that they could volunteer with. And Rachel and Lydia both pointed out that they tailor volunteering opportunities to the individual volunteer; for instance, while volunteers do a lot of leafleting or tabling, some volunteers who aren't comfortable doing outreach do work on their computers, contribute food for events, or make copies of print materials for the organization.

In the Office

After we returned to the office (arriving at 11:53am), Rachel assigned Molly, Michaela, and Deloris tasks to do on the computer. (The THL office in Philadelphia has 4 computer stations.) Michaela continued compiling restaurant listings for the New Jersey Veg Dining Guide, which she had been working on before we left to go leafleting. Molly wrote to potential donors of food and silent auction items for the Gala in December and tracked her contacts and responses in a spreadsheet. Deloris researched vegetarian and animal advocacy groups at colleges in the area, making a list of contacts for Rachel to reach out to for leafleting events on the relevant campuses. Later, Deloris stuffed some envelopes with letters to send to Costco for the corporate campaign THL is working on and counted leaflets that had come out of their bundles.

Rachel switched between a variety of tasks during the afternoon, including:

- Reporting the results of the leafleting on facebook and in the THL online system. They have an online handbook in development that covers all the tasks of a THL office; Rachel showed me the index for the page about organizing the gala, which had instructions for tasks as specific as acquiring tables and chairs. This handbook has been organized by Andrea Gunn, with input from others at THL. It isn't finished yet, but will eventually also include the spreadsheets tracking whether each office meets their yearly goals. Rachel input the leaflet distribution numbers into a Google Form and showed me the resulting spreadsheet, which tracks leaflet distribution, fundraising, etc. for all offices and THL as a whole.
- Setting Molly up to write to potential donors and handling replies to donors beyond the first contact, since Molly's internship ends on 9/18.
- Preparing for leafleting and tabling events over the weekend. Because Rachel planned to work from home on the 11th, she packed a tote with tabling supplies for a volunteer who would be tabling alone over the weekend and didn't have a key to the office, so she could leave it in the hallway to be picked up by the volunteer.
- Organizing the office calendar so that future weeks would have appropriate numbers of leafleting and social events, and corresponding with businesses where she planned to hold social events.

Other activities on her task list included:

Out of office:

- Leafleting or tabling 3-4 times per week
- Humane ed (eventually; Rachel had not yet given a humane ed presentation, but had gone to pitch a bundle of outreach activities to a marketing class at the Wharton School where students are required to pick an idea suggested by a local business and work on it for class credit)
- Vegan Drinks once per month at a rotating bar or restaurant
- Meatless Monday dinner/ weekly Team THL runs before dinner
- Refilling Vegan Starter Kit stands once per month

In the office:

- Planning the Gala for Dec 5th (currently confirming sponsors, donors, and speakers, collaboratively with David and Michelle)
- Scheduling Facebook posts
- Practicing the humane ed presentation
- Preparing the NJ Veg Dining Guide
- Setting up a petition against a commercial dairy at a local agricultural high school (asking that the dairy be closed but the school remain agriculture-focused)
- Management: finding and interviewing fall interns and reading about management

- Mailing letters to Costco as part of THL's campaign to get them to sell only cage-free eggs
- Setting up Meatless Monday parties
- Setting up "Dining to Defend" fundraisers with local restaurants
- Meetings with others at THL, including Andrea, Michelle, the all-team call, and the "newbie call" with other newer office directors
- Pushing her neighborhood, Chestnut Hill, to be more veg-friendly

Michaela left at 2:00 pm, and Molly left at 3. Deloris left a little while later. Rachel stayed in the office until at least 6:30, participating in my conversation with Harish, Lydia, and Denise.

Conversation with Board Members

THL board members Lydia Chaudry, Denise Tremblay, and Harish Sethu live in Philadelphia and met us at the office between 4:30 and 5:30 pm.

Lydia arrived first. She also works part time for THL, handling mail and mailed-in donations, helping coordinate volunteers and interns in Philadelphia, and otherwise assisting with daily organizational business and finances. While I was in the office, Lydia processed some mail and donations and took checks to the bank.

Board composition and operation

Lydia, Harish, and Denise have all been on the board of The Humane League for several years. There has been some change in board membership over that time, but it has been a fairly stable group of people. The board meets once every 4 months and also stays in touch with David via email and with THL staff in general through a Facebook group which the staff and board use for casual conversation. Members of the board also meet THL staff in person when they travel to other cities, for THL Galas or other reasons. (Lydia says she's met all but 2 or 3 of the newest staff members.)

The board generally operates through a consensus process; they sometimes take votes, but usually at that point they already know that everyone agrees on a course of action. In general their role is to advise and support David on decisions that he doesn't want to make alone. For example, when he hired for the Director of Development position, he did the interviewing, but then he prepared profiles of the top candidates to discuss with the board and get their views. Another example of a decision the board has helped with is when David at one time was considering doing direct mail fundraising for THL. Some of the board members felt that it is expensive to contact donors through the mail and would make THL look more similar to less efficient organizations. They did research on the likely costs and benefits of direct mail fundraising and shared it with David, and eventually everyone agreed that direct mail would not be the best way for THL to expand their funding.

Related to the stability of the board and their tendency to operate by consensus, they are very careful about the type of person they want on their board. Currently all their board members are very open to changing their views based on new evidence or arguments. They view this characteristic as the most important thing when looking for new board members. Especially because they do not have term limits and the board composition doesn't change a lot, they need to be open to new ideas as individuals, because new ideas won't come from the board members changing. If board members were dogmatically attached to particular advocacy methods, it would hamper THL's ability to change when it needs to change. On the other hand, having a consistent board provides stability for the staff; they don't have to worry that the organization's focus will change suddenly. It also allows them to be very careful about who they accept on the board, because they do not need to find new members often.

Board members do not have many other formal responsibilities beyond advising David in a general manner. They do help out with things in their professional areas (a former board member was a lawyer, and Denise is a financial manager), and of course Lydia is also a staff member. And they help with fundraising and donate to the organization.

Cash reserves

THL has recently started having enough cash reserves that they need to consider what the best thing to do with them is. They decided to invest them in a conservative manner balanced between index funds and bonds, similar to a typical retirement portfolio. They're currently in the process of investing funds, because they didn't want to invest all of their existing reserves at once. (Typical investment advice is to spread investment over a period of time to avoid the risk of investing all your assets at the top of the market.)

Challenges for THL

Harish said that the primary way in which he would like to see THL change would be to have it grow. He thinks the main change that is needed is to have more members/donors. Another change is that THL should hire a lawyer to support our corporate campaigns.

Lydia added that part of the challenge with growth for THL, especially with increasing the number of members, is that THL doesn't have as strong a brand as some organizations. For instance, Mercy for Animals is instantly recognizable for their undercover investigations. THL doesn't have one specific idea like that for which it is widely recognized even though board members and Rachel identified many key features of their brand, including local offices, a focus on effectiveness, and several individual programs. Denise did not add any additional changes she'd want to see at THL.

Another potential challenge for growth that the board and Rachel talked about is preserving the democratic nature that THL has now. Currently, everyone has ownership over their activities and feels heard; any staff member can suggest a change and have it be taken seriously. And everyone in the organization knows each other. The codification of

local office duties that Andrea has been working on provides structure, but not to the point that people can't pursue their own ideas or suggest changes for the organization. And in many cases people have been able to grow within the organization, from volunteer or intern to office director (as Rachel has) or to positions like Executive Director or Campaigns Director. As the organization grows, they consider it important not to grow too fast or in such a way that staff members no longer feel ownership over their activities and that their voices are respected.

THL History

Since the board members had been involved with THL for so long, I asked them about how they had gotten involved with the organization and how it had changed over time. All of them had originally become interested in the organization when, as Hugs for Puppies, it had started working more on farm animal issues and choosing the most effective tactics. All of them had been impressed with Nick Cooney and increasingly pleased with THL's work as the focus on farmed animals and effectiveness increased.

They did not think that THL had experienced any sudden changes in organization or focus as it grew or when David came on as Executive Director, especially because Nick remained involved with the organization when that happened. However, the board members other than Nick did start taking a more active role in advising David than they had taken in advising Nick, which they think worked out well.