

Dallen and the Rainforest

by Pam Genant

My son Dallen, now age ten, has always felt connected to the earth. He enjoys nature and wildlife and loves going to zoos, sometimes critiquing them on how he feels they replicate an animal's natural habitat, or commenting on how stressed or not stressed the animal must feel. We have read real books about animals and endangered species for as long as I can remember, and Dallen has taken a special interest in animal habitats and their protection.

I don't remember exactly where we found the link, but his favorite website has always been www.cloudforestalive.org, a wonderful, interactive site that deals with the Cloud Forests of Central America. His passion for animals has led us to have quite a collection here at home as well, and he makes sure that we only purchase captive bred animals and that we provide as realistic a habitat as possible.

From all his reading, and our reading together, he found an organization to support with his money – The Rainforest Alliance. This has been a source of comfort to him because he sees that he is doing something to help. In reading one of their reports several years ago, he discovered that Home Depot, the large home improvement chain store, was buying lumber from companies that clear cut the rainforest. And, while many stores had started buying only approved lumber (lumber that has been selectively cut, not affecting the ecosystem of the forest), Home Depot was not one of them.

This became a bit of a dilemma for our family, as we are home improvement NUTS, and Home Depot had been much like a second home for us. But, after hearing our son speak so passionately about the plight of the rainforest and the animals that call it home, we couldn't ignore this new information. So, we started sending our business elsewhere, and I helped Dallen find ways to speak out and support his cause. He began sending e-mails and letters to Home Depot explaining his position and asking for their help. We talked with the people at the local Home Depot to make sure they were aware of the practices of their company. To inform them about Home Depot, Dallen talked to anyone who would listen, and he encouraged them to join our family in our boycott of the company chain. He returned again and again to different websites in order to see how the campaign was going.

One day, he received an update in the mail stating that Home Depot had changed their practices and would be purchasing lumber and wood products from companies that used certified wood. That was an amazing day for Dallen. HE had made a difference – Dallen, an individual, and a young one at that. Most people probably considered his information simply the ramblings of a child, but he learned that when you add up all the individuals out there that care, you have quite a voice. You can make a difference. You can make a change. The light in his eyes and the joy on his face was something that I will never forget.

Through this experience, he has learned that you don't have to accept things as they are. So often, people in our society see things as black and white. "Those are the rules and I have to obey them, end of story." Or, "This is just the way it is and I can't change that." But, Dallen has learned – we all have learned – that small voices count, that we don't have to accept things the way they are, and that there are other people out there thinking the same thing.

This became his passion. This became something so important to him that he would read anything he could find about endangered animals, the rainforest, and company practices. He became a vegetarian. He began reading the labels on all the products we purchased to see if they were practicing earth-friendly harvesting, processing, and packaging techniques. Most companies that practice these techniques are very proud of that fact and will write it on the packaging. This led us to incorporate more organic foods into our life and to look at things like laundry detergent and toilet paper to see what we were giving back to the Earth and to our bodies. It has impacted our life in a great way. And it all started with an interest in animals and their habitats. I would have never been able to predict that his interest would have led us down that path. Of course, if I had stepped in and said, "Okay, you've been on the computer long enough," or, "You are just a child. Why don't we go play?" or if I had chosen to control him or decided not to mail his letters, we would not be in this great place we are today. It was only by giving him the freedom to explore his own interests and the help he needed in finding information that he was able to blossom and become such a powerful voice.

Dallen is currently working on a website for his animal passion. He wants to call it SEA – Saving Every Animal. He plans to list all the things that we can do, everyday, that will have a small impact on our ecosystem. He wants to link SEA to all his favorite websites. He wants to amplify his voice!