

Thomas Ponce: On Behalf of All Living Beings by Awakin Call Editors

Thomas Ponce is a 16-year-old animal rights advocate and a citizen lobbyist from Casselberry, Florida. He is the founder of Lobby For Animals, the Coordinator for Fin Free FL, and founder of Harley's Home, which is used as his school-based animal rights club. A vegetarian at age of 4, he began writing about animal rights at the age of 5. Soon after, Thomas's parents realized that his advocacy for animals was not a phase, but a way of life. "I feel that it is our responsibility as both citizens and human beings to use our minds, hearts and voices to speak up against the injustices we see in the world," explains Thomas. What follows is an edited version of an Awakin Call interview with Thomas. You can read or listen to the full version of the interview [here](#). At the time of this interview Thomas was 14-years-old.

Alissa Hauser: I first met Thomas back in April of 2012. He applied for a grant with the Pollination Project, which is the nonprofit organization that I run. He was twelve years old at that time. We all read his application thinking, "Is this kid for real? Is he seriously twelve years old?" He became an animal rights activist at the age of four! So, we will hear more about that journey and what it looks like to be a kindergarten animal activist during this call. Since that time, Thomas has launched a nonprofit lobbying organization called Lobby for Animals, which is dedicated to training and empowering people to lobby on behalf of animals in the political and legislative realm. I want to share a little bit about what he wrote in his application two years ago when he was launching Lobby for Animals. This is going to be a good throwback for you, Thomas.

He said, "I am starting the project because I am passionate about protecting animal rights. I am also just as passionate about educating as many people as I can about ways that they can make a difference in their own lives, as well as in the lives of the countless animals that are suffering on factory farms, in laboratories, and in animal entertainment. I know that this is the purpose of my life. I am here to make a difference, and I won't stop until I do. I know this project will be a success because I will make it a success."

Now, just two years later, Thomas has come a long way. We will talk about a bunch of things that he has done in the past. But I am really honored to have this opportunity to hear from and learn from Thomas about his journey and what's ahead for him. Welcome Thomas! Thank you so much for being here and sharing with everybody on this call.

Thomas: Thank you, Alissa!

Alissa: How are you feeling, Thomas?

Thomas: Not going to lie, a little nervous. But you know, that's the normal reaction.

Alissa: I've been on these calls, and I listen to these calls, and I can assure you that you are surrounded on this call by a virtual hug. It's a community who really wants to hear from you and is really behind you and supporting you. There is just a lot of love here.

Birju: True story!

Alissa: All right! Here's my first question for you: so many of us spend our whole lives searching for our purpose and looking for the meaning of our lives--what is your purpose?

Thomas: I feel that I was put on this earth to educate people and to try to raise awareness about the suffering and cruelty that animals have to go through in slaughterhouses and in people's everyday homes and just everywhere around the world. Also, I want to raise awareness about how we pollute the environment and how badly we treat our one and only home. I have been saying this a lot, but this is what I feel I am meant to do. I need to spread this message that we need to treat our earth and our animals better. We need to treat these living beings much better than we already do. Not only that, we have to treat each other better because the foundation of a good society, a good world, is under, I don't want to say niceness, but under a good heart, soul, and compassion. I think that sums up what I think is my purpose in this life.

Alissa: I love how you are speaking to the intersections of it all. It's so easy to think about you as an animal rights activist. But I love how, in speaking about your purpose, you talk about kindness toward all and the interconnection and weaving together of all of life. How did you know when this was your purpose? Was there a moment when you went, "Oh! This is what I need to do." How did this come about?

Thomas: It came from my heart. As far back as I can remember, I've known this. And it's like, I hate to repeat myself, but it's what I thought I was put on this earth to do. I need to let everybody know what's going on, how the animals suffer, and how we need to treat the environment better. I feel like this is what I need to do. I can't really pinpoint when I exactly knew this. I just sort of knew it.

Alissa: Well, I know that at age four, you became vegetarian and shortly thereafter, vegan. How did that happen? I mean, you weren't living in a vegan household. How did this happen?

Thomas: Once I made the connection of where our food comes from, cow to steak or pig to bacon, I said that I didn't want to contribute to this anymore. I wasn't going to stand for it anymore. That's what made me vegetarian and then vegan. As I got older, and I turned age nine, that's when I became vegan. When I told my parents why I became vegetarian at age four, they were perfectly fine with it. They supported me. They were willing to accept that this is what I wanted to do. They saw that it was not something I was just doing as a "phase." They saw that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, and they supported me. They didn't move into being vegetarian as easily, but as time went on, they eventually joined the vegetarian boat. When I turned nine, I became vegan. As I got older and started learning more, I realized that even though I am was not eating meat, I was still eating milk, cheese, egg. It was still contributing to the suffering of animals. I decided that I didn't want to contribute to that anymore. I decided to completely cut that off. So I decided to become a vegan, which completely stopped the contribution to the suffering of animals from my household.

Alissa: I would love for you to speak a little bit more about compassion because it is such

a big part of your life. What does compassion mean to you? How do you define it? Why is it so important to you as a way of life?

Thomas: I feel that it's something that comes from the heart. To be compassionate is to not harm another living being, to not have hatred in your heart, to respect life, and to respect that animals are living beings, and that they have hearts and souls and complex feelings. It is to know that all of us, no matter what race, sex, or gender we are, we are all equal. We are good people. We can be good people. And compassion means to not harm the people around us or the animals around us or the only planet we have, the earth.

Alissa: That's so beautiful. Thank you. I'd love for you share when you were in kindergarten, and you did a WOW project. Can you share a little bit about what the assignment was and what you did and even more so, what the reaction was to what you did?

Thomas: The WOW project was a school-wide project; it was called a reflection project. When I was in kindergarten, the assignment was to create an artwork project that made you say, "Wow!" I remembered seeing pictures of tigers online that had been killed by poachers. They were skinned and lay out across a table. So, I decided to get an orange background because that was my favorite color, then get a picture of a tiger on the left side and say, "This is them before." On the right side, get the picture of poachers standing over the dead tigers and leopards on the table and say, "This is them now." In the middle of it under the pictures, I had a small sentence saying that this is what truly made me say, "Wow!" because this is the cruelty in man or something to that effect. The reaction that had gotten from people, the teachers were shocked to say the least. The kids at that time, they were not able to take it in. The reaction was mostly shock and some good reaction because my project got entered to county level after winning the school level. Even though it never reached state level, it had gotten viewed by all the schools, which means that my message was spread to all the schools in the county. That made me extremely ecstatic.

Alissa: Well, I know how much just being able to spread the message is so important to you. So, that must have been so exciting. Not that long ago you had, what I considered to be, a legislative victory with a state senator. Can you tell us a little bit about what happened with the shark fin ban and what you were able to do?

Thomas: This all ties into something that happened to me when I was eleven. Basically, I had wanted to ban the sale, distribution, and trade of shark fins and shark fin products in the state of Florida. I had decided that the only way to do this was through lobbying. So, I looked up my facts and got my research together. I prepped and got the nervousness out and decided to go to our state senator. I had approached him with the idea of banning shark fins and shark fin products, and he was all for it. He signed up and said he would support this, and all I needed next was to get a house representative. I did the same thing, got my facts together, talked to the house representative, and, same response. When the bill came out, it went all the way up to committee, and then it died there. In the end, it still got introduced, and as long as people know that this is an issue and as long as people know that this is something that needs to change, I am happy with it. Even if my attempt to get it past the committee failed, I am still glad that I was able to get the message across and that this is something that needs to be changed. And there is always next session. I have that hope to look forward to.

Alissa: Well, Thomas, can you tell us why a ban on shark finning is so important? People may not know that issue.

Thomas: Of course! Sharks are what we call keystone predators. They maintain the order of balance in the underwater ecosystem. Sharks are top dog in the ocean; they are keystone predators. They maintain. When you take out a keystone predator, it disrupts the entire ecosystem. It's like a domino effect: everything falls. It's a terrible, terrible thing when these animals get removed. We need to keep sharks in the ocean. We need to protect the sharks because they are keystone predators. Without them, not only would the ocean be affected but also the land. Further along in the future, we would be looked back on as terrible people for causing the oceans to be polluted with the bodies of animals. That would destroy the ocean. We would be looked back on as monsters. This is probably the biggest point that I could possibly say. If the ocean dies, we die. The biggest threat facing sharks right now is us. It is our finning, our killing of them for greed, for sport, for food. We need to stop this. That's one of the driving points why I want to set a ban on the sale, distribution, and trade of shark fins and shark fin products. Because in the end, as I said before, if the ocean dies, then we die. If we can cut off the demand for shark fins and shark fin products, then there is no need for them. Then we don't have to continue the slaughter. We don't. If there is no demand, why would they supply? And that's what this bill would have done.

Alissa: So, how does it feel to go sit in front of your state senator? Sometimes it's hard to even get an appointment with the actual person. I remember when I tried to meet with a senator or an elected official. Sometimes I ended up talking to their assistant. It's like you have to be really important to sit with the actual person. How does it feel to go in there with something that they may say no to and have that meeting? Were you nervous? How did you prepare yourself?

Thomas: You don't get nervous once something like this comes up. I get nervous all the time, but they are people. They are not any higher up. Obviously, they are working for the state, but they are just people like us. We have to look at them as that. We don't need to fear them. They are here to represent us. They can't do their jobs unless we tell them how to do it, unless we show them what we want to see. To sit in front of a senator or a house representative or a congressman, it feels good. You have the feeling that you are doing something. I am letting my representatives know what I want to see. That's one of the best feelings in the world, knowing that you are contributing to the right in this world.

Alissa: From what you are talking about, it makes so much sense why you started Lobby for Animals. Can you talk more about why lobbying in particular, why that skill set was what really caught your attention and how did you actually create an organization around that?

Thomas: I learned about lobbying at the conference. That's when a light bulb went off in my head. I felt that this is what is going to actually implement change because we can protest, sign petitions, and we can do--what have you. That is fantastic. We are spreading the message. We are getting people to know the issue. But if we really want to make these changes solid, if we want to implement them, we have to do it through the law. We have to do it through the laws that we both live by ethically and the laws in our US government. That's when I had decided to create Lobby for Animals. I saw a need for this type of service. In order to implement that need, I had to create this website. I felt that if I didn't, this would go by. People wouldn't know that you could contact your legislator. That implemented, as I said before, the purpose of my life. When I created the website, I felt good. The fact that I had the opportunity to educate people not only about how we can change the laws in our government but also about animal rights,

animals, the environment. I was able to give them the tools that they needed to try to change both how our government works and how we are as people.

Alissa: You are kind of working on multiple levels, from the legislative and political level, which I would call one too many or many too many, but you also work one-on-one with people, where you just have a conversation with another person about what matters to you, about compassion. I would love for you to share this story about when you were eleven, how you convinced a fisherman to release a baby shark. Can you tell us about that one-on-one interchange, that heart-to-heart that you had? What did you say? What happened and how did it come about?

Thomas: Sure. It was December 16th, 2011. It was my birthday. I was doing a sort of National Geographic binge, and I had heard about a place in Florida called Venice Beach. It's nicknamed Shark Tooth Capital. I wanted to go there. I wanted to see if I could find any shark teeth and see if I could see the animals in the ocean. I thought it would be, overall, a great time. I had convinced my parents to take this drive all the way up to Venice, Florida. We got there; we went to the beach, and it was hot. It was fun. I found a Megalodon tooth, which completely excited me to no end. We were on our way to the hotel, and we had heard about a place called Sharky's Pier where you could go and see the sunset. I had heard about the sunset being beautiful, that the pink light in the sky was amazing looking, and so I decided, "why not? Let's go there." So, we went to the pier, saw the sunset. It lived up to people's recommendation. We were coming back, and I saw a fisherman reeling in a line. At the end of the line, I saw a baby Bonnethead shark. I saw this and I decided to act on it. I asked the man, "What are you going to do with the fish? What do you plan to do with this shark?" And he told me flat out, "I am going to gut it, kill it, skin it, and eat it." I don't think in that order. But that basically set off the red light, and I basically started telling him why he should not do this to the shark and why he should release it. I told him that it is an animal. It has a whole life of its own. This shark has complex feelings. It can do so many things. It has a family. It has animals that care about it. We should care about him or her. And I told him how sharks are keystone predators and how they balance the underwater ecosystem and why they are so important. I felt like I was talking to him forever. Eventually, he conceded and decided to let me release the shark. And when I looked at the shark and was about to release him, I saw that he had realized what I had done. And I saw that he had known that I wasn't going to let him die on that day in the pier, that I wasn't going to let him suffocate. When I released him, I felt fantastic because I knew that I was preventing a loss of life that day, the loss of a beautiful creature. And when I was on the drive home, I felt so many things. The ocean had made me feel so great. It made me feel fantastic, to know that because I had come there, this shark was now alive. It was a fantastic feeling. That's what had gotten me to start my fight for freedom for sharks. It had changed my paradigm on how sharks were based. It broke that idea of how sharks are portrayed in the movies. They are different from everyone else. They are equals and they are misunderstood. That changed me that day and it led me to being part of what I am today. I will never forget that day.

Alissa: I am so moved by that story and your connection with the shark itself. And knowing that, without words, without saying verbal language, the shark had some sense of what was happening and that you were stepping in and being kind of relentless with that fisherman saved that shark's life. One of the hardest things for me about being an animal advocate and being "veganish" is when I watch animal suffering, when I watch the factory farm videos, watching the level of torture, inhumanity, and suffering that happens, my heart gets so broken that I feel like I can't repair it. It's so traumatizing. How do you hold that space for that level of pain and suffering? How do you view the videos or get

in the space of what's happening for these animals who are being tortured and abused and treated as objects? How do you go on after you touch that raw painful space?

Thomas: I use that to fuel me. I know that they are suffering everyday. I know that hundreds of thousands of animals are being slaughtered for their skin, their fur, their flesh, and their products everyday. I know this, and I use that to fuel me. I look at that and say, "Even though this is happening, I need to keep going because, if I don't, it's going to happen again and again and again. If I don't try to stop it, at least, then it's never going to stop. If I don't try to convince people that this is something that's wrong, that we need to stop killing them and slaughtering them for menial purposes, it's never going to stop." And I use the knowledge that they are dying everyday as a fuel. If I can get one person, just one person, to even think about changing their lifestyle, to even think about not buying a fur coat, not buying that package of meat in the store, then I am preventing the loss of one life, or I am at least convincing one person to try to change their ways. And then I am hoping to stop the terrible atrocities that are happening.

Alissa: What is it like to be a teenager having the priorities that you have? Do you feel like you are a teenager? Do you ever feel lonely? You know, holding these issues as so important, when other kids your age are playing Xbox or Minecraft or something. How is it to be you?

Thomas: Age has never been that much of an issue for me. I certainly feel older, and people are telling me that my voice is deeper and that I am starting to grow a mustache. But I feel, honesty, the same. My priorities, when it comes to animals and the environment, have not changed. I still feel the same love and compassion for them that I did when I was four. I know that I'm physically older, and I know that I'm emotionally older, but I still feel the same love and compassion for them. I still feel the same want to change the world as I did when I was younger. I know that I'm glad that I am a good person. I may be different from other people, but I'm not them. And I'm happy for the way that I am, for the way that I turned out. I'm glad that I'm not sitting in the back of the classroom just listening to music. I speak and feel from my heart, and I think people listen to it, not because of my age, but because they know that it is coming from my heart. They know that this is something that I care about.

Alissa: What's it like to go to school with these beliefs? What's it like to be around other kids your age in your school environment as the vegan kid? How does it feel to be in school?

Thomas: To be the vegan kid in school is, honestly, I like it. It means that I am different from other people. It means that I'm not just blending in with everybody; I'm not being the same. A lot of kids get that stereotype of vegans being unhealthy. A lot of kids can be selective about letting you into a conversation or playing a sports game with them. Kids can be mean. That's normal kid behavior, unfortunately. But I don't let that get to me. I know that what I'm doing is right, and I know that I have a good heart and soul. I know that I'm still doing what I feel is the right thing to do. In the end, whether I'm popular, whether I'm hated, or whether I'm whatever, I'm still doing the right thing. I'm still doing what I want to do.

Alissa: Before the call, you shared with me a few pieces of writing. Feel free to say no, but I read them all and thought that some of them are really beautiful, and I was wondering if you would read us the poem that you wrote called "When I go to school I have to deal." It

so beautifully spoke to being in school being you. If you are willing to read it, I'd love for you to share when you wrote it, etc.

Thomas : Sure.

When I go to school, I have to deal

With mean people, rude people, and everybody's schpeel.

No one knows about half the stuff, about dealing with kids who think they are tough

Always shouting out and trying hard to annoy

Whenever I speak, you go acting like a two-year-old boy

You and your friends think you are so damn cool

You think you are the only ones who count in the school

You started up and they join in

Your ignorance is truly a sin

You think you are funny

You think it's just comic relief

You get enjoyment out of giving me grief

I never did a thing to gain your attention

But I'm losing my patience, might be time for an intervention

I try not to sweat all the small stuff and feed your act

I know I'm a better person than you and that's a fact

Maybe one day you'll grow up and you'll see

Maybe that day will be when you have to get your paycheque from me

I know this is all part of the middle school game

Popularity rules and that's a shame

No matter what they think and no matter how they truly see me

They only know what they want to see

Passing judgment without taking time to look

It's like only reading the cover of a book

You think by being mean you'll try to oppress

The kind-hearted kid from getting any press

Picking on people with that cocky smirk

Trying to hide the fact that you are just a jerk

A fake and fraud while inside class

Then in the hallways niceness takes a pass

It's not the teacher's fault that they don't see

How ugly and insensitive kids can be

Smart kid, geeky kid, pretty, handsome, or a nerd

Fat, skinny kid, we're all just people and deserve to be heard

Alissa: Thank you for sharing that. When did you write that and in what context?

Thomas: I think I wrote that when I was in sixth grade, and I don't think it was a contest. I think it was part of an assignment. It was about writing about your normal school day. It had to do with writing about school or people in school or sharing your normal school day. I don't think it was part of a contest.

Alissa: That's your normal school day?

Thomas: To an extent. I am going to high school next year, so I can't really speak on how it's going to be this upcoming year.

Alissa: You hold that much wisdom and so much foresight. You hold it in a way that an older person would look back and say, "Oh! When you get older you'll see all of this in context." You already have that context. It's really quite amazing. Can you tell us about writing and what role writing plays in your life? How do you use your writing?

Thomas: Basically, I use writing as a way to sort of let go; it's sort of a release. I forgot to mention this before when I was talking about feeling hopeless. I also can use writing to sort of vent in a way. Let's say that I just found out that a major law has passed that's going to defend animals, I'll feel happy and will write a short poem or short story. If I am feeling angry or sad, I'll do the same thing, write a short poem or short story. It allows me to put my feelings on paper. It allows me to get my feelings out, in a way that doesn't involve talking. With every feeling--happy, angry, or sad--especially angry, we can sort of get our words ruffled up. But when we are thinking clearly and when we are able to write it down with a pen, it's much easier. It solves my problems, makes me feel better. It lets me release whatever feelings I have bottled up, whatever emotions I want to let out. It also allows me to educate people as well. If I ever have a project like "At school I have to deal," I was able to read that out in front of the entire class. It allowed me to share how I felt without going to a teacher and telling her. It allowed me to spread what I want to talk to people about. If I wanted to talk about the subject of animal rights or the environment, and if I was able to put that in writing, and say there was a project for that in school, I could write about that. People would be

able to see it. It would be either hung up or people would be able to read about it. They would be able to read it for themselves. They would be able to see what I am trying to talk about. It allows me to teach people about the cruelties that are happening to the animals, about how we pollute our environment, about the regular school day that people can go through sometimes, how a lot of the time people can act mean to other students and that it goes completely unnoticed.

Alissa: You are so level headed and have such a good attitude. On this call, I will tell you that I started tearing up two or three times today talking to you.

Thomas: Sorry!

Alissa: No, please! It's good. I love it! When my heart opens and breaks, more of us can get in. It's a practice that I welcome. Do you ever lose it and sob in the corner?

Thomas: I don't think I've ever lost it before. I don't know if it will ever happen. But at this point in time, I don't think I have ever lost it. I've gotten angry at some things that have happened. If I ever saw how a fisherman were to catch a shark and flaunt it online, that would make angry. I would probably write about it. It would make me angry but not to the point of where I would completely flip out or cry in the corner. I do still feel these emotions. It's not like I am supremely angry or yelling or sobbing in the corner. It's not something I've done yet.

Alissa: Before we open up for other people's questions, I wanted to make sure to ask you, so many people on this call are already vegetarian, vegan, or animal advocates in different ways, what is the next level? If we are eating in a compassionate way and aware of animals, what's the next thing we can do?

Thomas: You can try to research online. Pick an animal that you feel passionate about; pick a subject and research it online. Find a problem pertaining to that animal or subject and face it head-on. Take it. Find a way to get rid of that problem. Whether it be through the law, whether it be through raising awareness, try to get rid of the problem, be it shark finning, circus cruelty, whatever, vivisection. Any subject you want to tackle, learn about it, go for it, educate yourself. If you have children, educate your children. Whatever you can do, just go for it. Do something.

Birju: Hmm. Thank you so much, Thomas. Just to echo Alissa, it has been emotional listening to this for me. I appreciate the heart and the vulnerability with which you have been sharing. I am wondering if I can take the prerogative and ask a question on my behalf first. Is that all right, Alissa?

Alissa: It's all you, Birju.

Birju: Thomas, thank you again. It's been wonderful to listen to you thus far. I'm curious. One question that came to me as I was listening to you is about this concept of compassion capacity, where sometimes, you show people that are suffering, and they just shut down. Think of the commercials that are showing starving children in Africa, and people almost tune it out. And what I hear you describe is something that allows you to not shut down, something that allows you to not tune it out and close it off but quite the opposite. And it makes me wonder what it is that you have done in your life, knowingly or not, to grow your heart, to grow that compassion capacity so you can see things that are really painful for most people to see and to go toward it and to bring out your vulnerability as a result?

Thomas: I honestly don't know what makes me able to stand to see it. I don't know if it is because I was raised in a good household with love and compassion. I've known people to look up to. I've had this want to try to change things. I've seen a lot of videos of the slaughterhouses. I've seen a lot of the videos of the children in Africa. I've seen all of that. I don't really know what makes me able to stand it. I don't know if it is because I've seen them a lot or if I'm used to seeing it or if it is my desire to know what's going on in the world. I try to know what's happening and then to try to change that. In my opinion, ignorance is never bliss. Knowledge is the most powerful thing you can have.

Birju: Thanks for sharing that as the context for your journey, and I would love to turn it over to our first caller.

Wendy: Thomas, I so much appreciate the work you are doing, your compassion and your clarity and your purpose. You are a real teacher to all of us. I want to pick up a little bit about what Birju and Alissa just said, which is talking about the compassion issue and compassion fatigue. I spend most of my life really supporting animal welfare and animal rights; I give money to various organizations who do so. What I have found is that I don't have the capacity to look at the pictures, the horrible pictures. I have actively withdrawn my support to organizations who show that and have funneled my money to organizations such as Best Friends, which is enormously successful; they tell the story of what's happened, so we know what's happened, but they also show pictures of the rescue animal. I just wanted to say that for me, there is a balance between bringing forth the compassion, but without immobilizing the person who really wants to do good and support the cause. Just wanted to bring out my dilemma and how I have chosen to handle that. It's just another way to bring support for the cause that we all care so much about. Thank you so much.

Thomas: Thank you!

Birju: Thank you, Wendy.

Alicia: Before I ask my question, I just wanted to share a quick story. I actually experienced a similar thing with the shark. A friend of mine stepped on a hook, and when she pulled it out, there was a baby shark hanging from the hook. I took the shark from her and pulled the hook out. Just like you mentioned, looking at the shark's eyes in that moment, it's like it has an awareness of what's going on and putting it back in the water and watching it swim away made me feel the joy and the freedom of the shark being released. I just thought it was a pretty cool that we had similar experiences. My question, you mentioned on your WoW project for your school that you used the tigers as an example. It reminded me of the project that's going on in Russia that the Wildlife Conservation Society is doing. It's a rehabilitation project and what they do is take orphaned tiger cubs from the mothers who have been poached. They take the cubs and rehabilitate them with no human contact. They prepare them to hunt and be released back into the wild. The director of the project mentioned that one of the rehabilitated tigers attacked and killed a fisherman, so now there is whole controversy surrounding the project. So a lot of the people in Russia turned against him. But my thoughts on the matter are like, a lot of us think that we are more entitled to life than a tiger, that we are more entitled to life than any animal. I was wondering if you ever had a conversation with someone like that, something that you may have said that caused them to shift in the way they see things. Just wondering if you have ever had that conversation before. People tend to get defensive when you ask them to question the way they've always seen things.

Thomas: I tried to explain to them in the best way possible. Of course when the social norm is challenged, whatever, the status quo is challenged, people always get put on the defensive. If we approach it from a peaceful stance, it sort of nullifies that defensiveness that people can get into. And I also wanted to mention, as you said, a lot of people have a superiority effect to them, that they think, "Well, my life is more important than the tiger's." A life is a life. We should not value one life over another, be it tiger, insect, or whatever. No life is less valuable than anyone else's. That shouldn't be thought of as correct, that anyone's life is more important than the other. That's one of the other issues that I see. If someone were to do that to a human, if someone were to say, "My life is more important than this person's life," it would be ridiculed as terrible. That person would be ridiculed. But if this were to happen to an animal, a lot of the people would just turn their heads and walk away. It's a terrible thing that happens. That's one of the reasons why we have to keep doing what we do. Don't get frustrated; don't let it affect you. Don't get disgruntled about it. It's completely normal for people to do this. You have to keep going. You have to not let it affect you.

Alicia: I just hope that one day we get to the point where it is not seen as the norm, not seen as the status quo. One day the status quo will be that we are all equal. All animals on the planet are equal.

Thomas: Exactly. That's the correct paradigm to have.

Birju: Thank you. The next question that I am seeing here came from online. We have a question from Jackie in San Jose.

Jackie: Thank you for sharing that great poem. It had tremendous meaning for me and my friends who are listening. Do you keep a gratitude journal? It's a great way to track your progress and that of other animal rights advocates and to celebrate the good news of the people changing their ways and know that this movement is gaining ground.

Thomas: I think it's an excellent idea. I don't, at the moment, have a gratitude journal, but I will definitely look into getting one. I do write and that's sort of my way of keeping track of things. I also remember a lot of things that happen. I have signs up in my room. I have a ton of pictures and writings that remind me of the good and the bad. But the journal is a great idea.

Birju: I am sure that would have Jackie smiling. I am assuming she is listening. So, one question that comes up for me, Thomas, this word "compassion" and the way that you frame it and have been articulating it here, I am wondering how you have seen your compassion grow and be applied elsewhere in your life? Do you have thoughts on what direction you see your compassion response growing in as you go forward?

Thomas: When it comes to growing, my idea on what compassion is has grown since I was younger. It went from an idea that was in me and sort of transcended into sharing it. It's gone from something I keep to myself and share with only a couple of people to something that now I'm able to share with a ton of people. I want to let people know about the injustices in the world and how we can fix them. I am able to let people hear the message that I want out. I remember I woke up one morning and read an email that surprised me. Somebody from Spain had contacted me and told me about what was going on there, about the stray animals there and how he would like some help with it. He wanted to know how I could try to help or what he could do to help, how he could go vegan or how he could try to change the situation. So I worked with him for a couple of

months, and he eventually ended up going vegan! And that was sort of a visual representation of what I was able to do. I was able to turn this person who needed help with this; I was able to help him. I saw what I was able to do. I saw that I was able to spread the message to another person, so he can spread to another person and another person. Eventually, soon everyone will have the same idea.

Birju: In this community we have a phrase for that called a ripple effect. Thank you for articulating that.

Jey: Hello, my name is Jey, and I am listening to the call with my mother. You are very inspiring and thank you for what you do for the animals. How do you work with other organizations that help animals to help more animals?

Thomas: Thank you for coming in to the call. When I was younger, I joined up with a bunch of organizations to try to raise awareness about animal rights and animal cruelty. After I had seen what was going on, I decided to spread awareness about it. If I see that an organization is doing a campaign or fundraiser or whatever, I post it on my Facebook or LinkedIn. I will do whatever I can to spread that message.

Question: Is it easy to work together? Because you have the same goal, is it easy to talk and raise awareness together with another organization?

Thomas: I think we all need to work together, and it's easy to work with an organization to try and raise awareness because you have the same common goal in mind. In the end, it is about the animals and the environment. We all have the same idea. We all want to try to stop this and protect our planet and animals. When we work together, we only come closer to the end goal. We are stronger. We can spread our message further. Two heads are better than one, and four hands are better than two.

Alissa: Thomas, I saw a question from the chat that I wanted to ask you. Somebody was asking what do you want to be when you grow up?

Thomas: One thing I definitely want to do is go around and speak in schools. One of my main beliefs is that if we can teach children at a young age about compassion and how to treat the animals and the environment, it's something that will stick with them when they grow older. If we can spread that message about compassion and life, we can definitely change the world with the new generation coming in. If we can teach and encourage our children to change the world when they are little, when they are young, then they will grow up to be much more compassionate people. They will grow up to be responsible, compassionate, loving. When they raise their kids, they will teach them the same values that they know. So the cycle of killing, of not feeling, of bullying, that cycle can be broken. We can start an entirely new cycle of compassion, love, life, healthiness.

For me personally, I want to start talking to them when they are young because I feel like it can be relatable. If a kid sees an adult going into their classroom to talk to them about it, some of them won't be able to relate because they think "Well, this person is an adult, and they probably reached this conclusion when they were older." If they see it coming from someone close to their age or even at their age, they are like, "This is somebody who is almost like me. I can relate to this person. If this person can do it, why can't I?" I've heard a lot of kids say this. The main reason a lot of them don't want to try to make change, or try to change the issues that they see, like bullying, is because of their age. Because they are kids, they can't do anything. They think that, "Well, I am seven, so I can't change anything." You can. Age does not restrict what

you can do. Your age doesn't dictate what you can say, what you can do, who you can talk to. It doesn't restrict what you can feel passionate about. If a seven-year-old wants to go around the world and try to change it, they can. They have every right to. That's the message I want to spread to them. That's one of the reasons why I want to talk in schools. I also want to work in the field of law. I want to maybe go into politics. I am not sure about politics, but I'm definitely sure about law and 100 percent sure about talking in schools. I have to mull it over a little bit. I definitely want to keep learning.

Thank you guys for everything that you all do each day individually. I have another poem; if it's okay can I read it out. It's called "I AM"

I am an animal activist

Standing up for what I believe

Speaking out for change to be achieved

Never being silent when the cause is right

Exposing the mass suffering and individual plights

Being a voice for those who have none

Working and educating until the deed is done

Raising awareness for those who are blind

Relentless persistence until the truth they find

Being an activist starts in the heart

Realizing the bigger picture that we all play a part

Saying no more will we accept the lies and secrets that for years have been kept

No longer will we turn a blind eye

And continue to watch you murder and lie

These innocent beings with a soul and heart

No longer will we allow you to rip their lives apart

This is what being an activist is to me

I will continue to fight until they are all free

I am a vegan.

Cruelty free is my life

And compassionate living with very little strife
To harm no living being is my mission you see
Love the animals always, but let them be
Not for food, clothing or entertainment or in labs
Their lives are worth more than shoes or a bag
Who are we to pick and choose?
Which living beings we can use and abuse
Being vegan is the choice for me
And for any true animal lover, it's the only way to be
I am a citizen lobbyist
This is our government at the time we knew
We have the power to change things and see them through
There is no reason to sit idly by
While the laws start to take effect, that make us want to cry
We as citizens need to find our voice
We need to realize and understand that we have a choice
If we don't speak up, how will they know?
Don't let the opposition be the only one who shows
A phone call, a letter, a meeting or two
By yourself, with a friend, hell, bring a crew
So take the initiative and make your opinions known
Our representatives won't act until they are shown
I am a good person
I do what's right no matter how tough
No one ever said it's easy, sometimes it's quite rough
But to know in my heart, I did the right thing

Warms my heart and put things on a positive swing

Hurt no one is my motto you see

Learn and grow and always happy you'll be

Treat everyone how you'd like to be treated

Your conscience will be clear and with happiness you'll be greeted