

INSPIRED LIKE YOU

Meet teens just like you who are doing amazing things. Read their stories and be inspired to change the world and achieve *your* dreams!



Truth Is Saving Bats

Are you thinking these creatures are creepy? Think again. Truth, 14, wants you to know bats help our environment—and need to be protected.

I love that bats break the rules of nature! They've mastered flight, even though they're mammals.

BY TRUTH MULLER,
AS TOLD TO JANE BIANCHI

When I was little, I'd see tons of bats flying around streetlights at night in my neighborhood in upstate New York. But I'll never forget the first time I saw a bat up close. I was 4 years old, and my dad was taking down our backyard sun umbrella. When he dropped it on the porch, it squeaked. All of a sudden, a cute little brown bat crawled out from inside the umbrella. I was **mesmerized**.

By the time I turned 7, though, I noticed something strange: All the bats in my neighborhood had disappeared, and I wondered why.

Then, three years ago, when I was 11 and visiting the state fair, I checked out a wildlife booth. What I learned there solved the mystery of what had happened to my town's bats.



I'm building this bathouse, which is like a birdhouse for bats.

A disease called “white nose syndrome” had killed 93 percent of New York State’s bats (and roughly 6 million bats across the country!). I was horrified. I asked the bat biologist at the booth what I could do to help, and she said, “Tell others what’s been happening. Help people understand that bats are important to our environment and need to be protected.”

Done, I thought. Even though most activists save fluffy pandas or adorable dolphins, I liked the idea of rooting for the underdog.

EXPERT STATUS

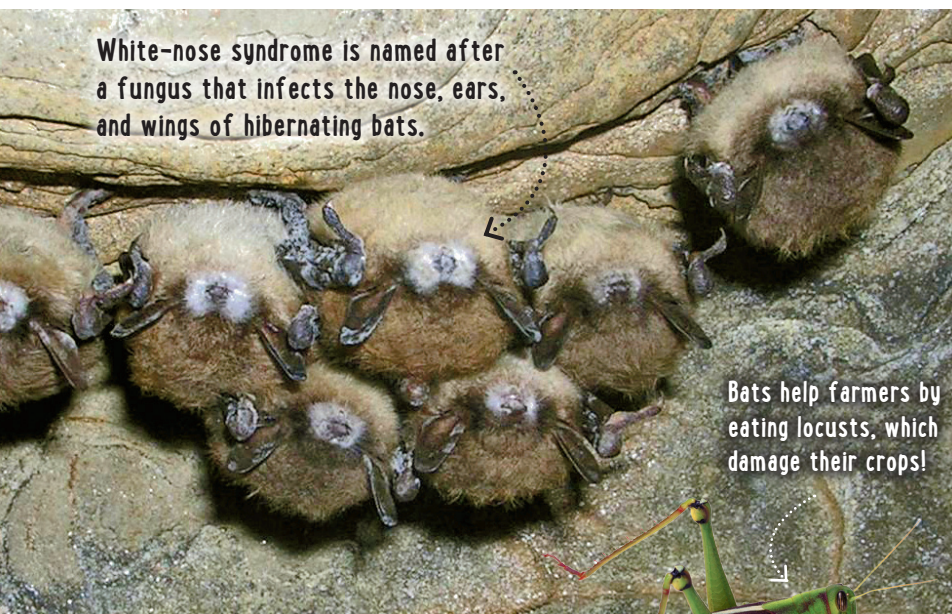
If I was going to teach people about bats, I had to know my stuff. My first stop? The library, where I eventually checked out every book on bats they had—all 40!

Next, I started a Facebook page called Buddies for Bats and posted any photos, facts, and videos that

I could find. Then I wrote a letter to the host of an environmental program on my local radio station, asking if they’d do a show on bats. (They did!)

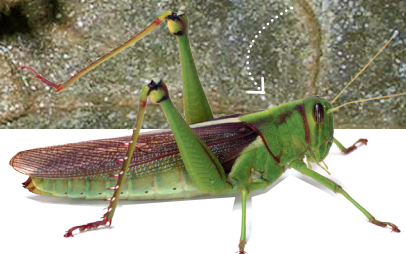
But I still wanted to find a way to educate people face-to-face. So I reached out to a teacher I had in elementary school and asked if I could make a presentation to her class. She said yes, so I printed 8” x 10” photos of bats and made handouts. I also gathered props, like bug spray and plastic foods, to describe how bats help farmers (and protect our food supply) by eating crop-damaging insects.

I practiced my presentation until it shone like a polished stone. It went over so well that other teachers started requesting me. My mom, who volunteers with libraries, also got me gigs at libraries. Over the past three years, I’ve talked in front of everyone from 5-year-olds to senior citizens!



White-nose syndrome is named after a fungus that infects the nose, ears, and wings of hibernating bats.

Bats help farmers by eating locusts, which damage their crops!



I collect lots of different things, like stamps, antique bottles, and rusty metal objects.



FIGHTING FOR RESPECT

During my presentations, I spend a lot of time **debunking** myths. Many people think that bats can get tangled in your hair, that they’re blind, and that they always carry rabies—but none of that is true.

The more I present, the more I notice that I am changing minds. I have watched people go from dismissing bats as “icky” to truly understanding them and advocating for them.

I set up this booth at local events, so people can stop by and learn all about bats.



AL HICKS/INDEC; BATS: KIM TAYLOR/NPL/INDEN PICTURES; LOCUST: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM; SAUSAGE: COURTESY OF THE MULLER FAMILY (ALL OTHER PHOTOS)

Italian sausage is one of my favorite foods. I also love pork lo mein and anything made from exotic fruits, like tamarind soda.



I don’t think it gets much more supportive than my parents. There’s no way I could have launched Buddies for Bats without their help!

And while getting people to respect bats is pretty hard, getting them to respect me has been difficult too. When I first applied to host a booth at a local street fair in 2011, the event managers thought I was too young. But I refused to take “no” for an answer. I continued to make my case, and they finally said yes! The best part is, I impressed them so much with my turnout—100 visitors on my first day—that they now invite me back every year.

FINDING SUCCESS

Since beginning my project in 2011, so many amazing things have happened. Last year, I was

awarded a \$1,000 grant by the Pollination Project, a group that funds projects that make the world a better place.

I was also contacted through Facebook by a teacher in Croatia who was developing a bat-education program for teens and wanted my help. And this past spring, I got to travel to Washington, D.C., to present my work on bats at the first-ever Congressional Science Fair!

It’s been a wild ride. I hope to keep working on Buddies for Bats until at least college. Right now, I’m thinking of becoming a marine biologist someday. As long as I’m helping animals, I’ll be happy. •

3 Things Truth Wants You to Know

1 ENJOY THE VIEW. If you do see a bat, enjoy its presence and try not to interfere. No one but a trained professional should ever touch a wild animal, healthy or sick.

2 PROTECT OUR PLANET. We have only one Earth. It’s a precious place. If we damage it with pollution and development, we won’t get a second chance.

3 FOLLOW YOUR HEART. Don’t pursue a goal just because someone makes you feel like you have to. Whatever pulls at your heart the most is the path you should take, even if the goal is hard to reach or may seem silly to others.