

# Zoë Weil: idealist, teacher, writer

By ELKE DORR

**SURRY**—Some people might call Zoë Weil an indefatigable idealist for her belief in the possibility of achieving a peaceful world where, in her words, “people live humanely and sustainably.” To those skeptical of such an ideal, Weil would simply say it doesn’t matter—she is neither discouraged nor dissuaded by the doubts and skepticism of others. As she has shown in her career and published books, her commitment to her work—training people to be humane teachers—is as unwavering as her conviction in the work’s aim.

Raised in New York City, Weil lived in Philadelphia before moving to Surry in 1996 with her husband and son. After having been exposed to humane education practices and teaching, Weil co-founded the Institute for Humane Education, dedicated to helping people teach children how to “live with compassion, integrity, and wisdom,” and to recognize that “human rights, environmental preservation, and animal protection [are] interconnected dimensions of a healthy, just society.” It is this philosophy that undergirds the Institute’s mission and the teaching practices Weil advocates.

President of the Institute, Weil has not only trained hundreds of humane teachers in workshops conducted throughout the U.S., Canada, and at her facility in Surry, but has written a number of articles and books on the subject of humane education as well. In *The Power and Promise of a Humane Education*, 2004, her advice is directed to those in the education field, while in *Above All, Be Kind*, 2003, it is for parents. In her latest book, *Claude and Medea: The Hellburn Dogs*, Weil makes her first foray into the world of children’s literature, incorporating the principles of humane education to change the lives of the book’s two central characters.

The heroes of the book—Claude, the son of famous, affluent parents, and Medea, the daughter of an immigrant, blue collar, single

father—attend a posh private school in New York City’s Upper East Side. For Medea, a scholarship has made that situation possible. When an eccentric substitute teacher, Ms. Rattlebee, arrives in their fifth grade class, their lives change in response to her unusual teaching methods and ideas through which the two learn about issues such as animal cruelty, pollution and social injustice. Weil chuckles at the notion that the unconventional Ms. Rattlebee bears any resemblance to her creator, conceding only that “I’m short like she is,” and adding that she, Weil, is “not as intuitive, wise or eccentric.” As for Claude and Medea, the two attempt to solve a rash of dog thefts in the city as a consequence of their newfound awareness of social ills, and in the process not only encounter a group of ne’er-do-wells, but put themselves at significant risk as a result.

Weil said she had “the most fun writing this book,” compared to the others, and that the idea came to her “all at once,” during her drive home from the Bangor airport after having attended a conference. Within two weeks she had the first draft and the framework, she said, for what she plans will be a series that will have the two heroes on the trail of another mystery to solve, enabling them to help right other wrongs.

Unlike her experience writing *Claude and Medea*, *Above All, Be Kind* was a much more difficult book to write. Weil confessed that at first she “felt presumptuous” in giving par-

ents advice on child rearing, having only one child herself who, at the time, was just nine years old. But she forged ahead, committed to her belief in the humane philosophy she so passionately embraces, and eager to share what she had learned as a humane teacher.

*Above All, Be Kind* explores, through anecdotes, stories and interviews, how children can be guided toward humane behavior. Weil offers activities and ideas for achieving this goal, and also includes data on a broad range of topics in a section titled “Helpful Hints: Facts, Stats and Lists.” She offers, for example, information about health and nutrition, noting the average blood pressure of vegetarians compared to non-vegetarians. Also included in this section are statistics about how Americans spend their time and money; a partial list of laboratories that do not use animal testing to produce their products; and information



Zoë Weil

Photo by Elke Dorr

about world hunger, all intended to inform her readers and help them make choices that Weil hopes will foster more humane behavior, ultimately helping to create a more peaceful and sustainable world. As for writing projects in her future, besides the next books featuring Claude and Medea, Weil is currently finishing another book in her educational series, this one entitled *Most Good, Least Harm*, to be published in 2008.

When she’s not writing, parenting, or teaching others how to incorporate the principles of humane education into their own teaching methods, Weil said she pursues a variety of interests, including gardening, swimming, canoeing and reading, and commented that she completed a triathlon last summer. In addition to these pursuits, she said enthusiastically, “I love to give tours of beautiful places.” She also admitted to being a huge fan of Flash in the Pan, a steel drum band, and confessed to being “often the first one dancing” when the band performs locally. If she had another life to live, Weil mused that she might want to be a comedian, spreading goodwill through humor, another way by which to achieve what she has undertaken as her life’s goal: making the world a better place.