

# Activists target local schools with campaign against dissection

By ANDREA BAXTER

Educators have traditionally regarded dissection as an essential factor in teaching biological and physical sciences, but a growing number of people believe the practice is barbaric and expensive and should be eliminated in most educational programs.

West Michigan for Animals representatives last week hosted a news conference at the Cactus Stand in Standale — across the street from their anti-dissection billboard — to announce a campaign through which local schools will be asked to offer students alternatives to dissection.

Organization President Melissa Bilski, who has been active with the organization nearly two years, said technology has afforded science teachers very viable alternative programs, which are less expensive and more effective educational tools.

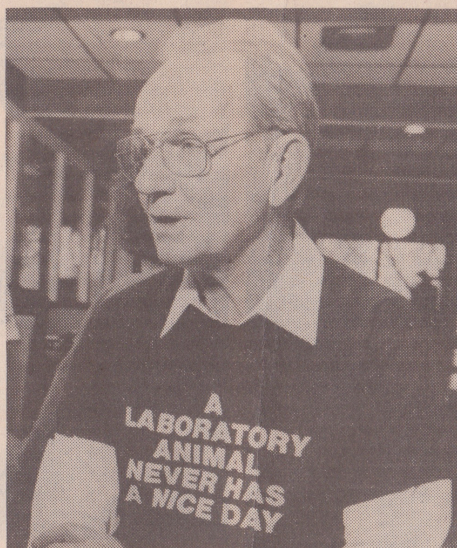
"We want school systems to stop buying animals for dissection," she said. "There are computer programs and models schools can

use and even veterinary schools have come up with new things so they don't have to use dissection like they did in the past."

Bilski said West Michigan for Animals approached Kentwood Public Schools administrators recently in hopes that science teachers would consider alternatives to dissection. Voters in the district had just defeated a \$38 million bond issue proposal and Bilski said she thought school officials would be receptive to the cost-cutting suggestion.

"Kentwood is still stuck on its choice and the teachers still want to dissect," Bilski said. "I think a lot of the problem is that if schools go with computer programs, stand-up models, and pictures, the teachers will have to re-learn those things. A lot of them are set in their teaching ways and don't want to bother. Dissection is an easy week for them. They give the kids frogs or cats, tell them what to do, and sit back."

The leading supplier of preserved animals for biology classes now



ADVANCE photo by TOM FIRME

Harold Mercer, of West Michigan for Animals, says schools would save thousands of dollars if preserved animals were replaced with re-useable models, computer-simulated dissection programs, and videotapes of dissection.

charges between \$67.33 and \$118 for a dozen bullfrogs, Bilski said, while anatomical models, which show and label all the organs, range in price from \$205 to \$255. Computerized dissection programs are available for \$10.95 and can be used with Apple and Commodore computers.

Bilski said she thinks taxpayers are frustrated and should encourage school officials to consider their options.

"Once you buy a computer program or a model frog, it's yours forever and you can use it as many times as you want," she said.

Mike Mulder, chairperson of the science department at West Catholic High School, said he has not been approached about offering alternatives to dissection, but that students who did oppose the use of animals are allowed to complete science curriculum requirements without participating.

"I've only had one student in 15 years who emphatically refused to dissect," he said. "We made other arrangements. She made clay models to fulfill the requirements."

Mulder said the total elimination of dissection is comparable to "teaching English without ever using grammar." "I don't dissect to kill," he said. "I dissect because it's a better learning tool. If someone could show me that you could do it on a computer as well, I'd have no problem with it."

Kelloggsville High School Principal George Stamas said his school does offer alternatives at the request of students and will continue to do so, as long as the alternatives prove effective.

"We have had students who request not to participate in dissection for various reasons and they are responsible for the material, but they do not have to participate," he said. "Computer simulations and plastic models have been allowed and we try to use models when we can. But nobody gets off the hook when it comes to knowing the material."

Representatives of West Michigan for Animals will during the next several months discuss with area school officials the available alternatives to dissection. Organization member Harold Mercer takes very seriously his mission to protect animals from dissection.

"We hate to threaten schools. We'd rather let them know the options that are out there. It's always nicer to come to an agreement over a table where everyone ends up satisfied," he said. "But we want to eliminate animal abuse wherever and whatever it is in Kent County and we're not little wimps who are just going to sit around over this."