

## Andrew Holleman's Commitment

*Excerpt from Kids with Courage by Barbara A. Lewis, appearing in 8 Keys of Excellence: Principles to Live By by Bobbi DePorter with permission.*

Andrew Holleman had practically grown up on the wetlands. He loved its plants, creatures, and gooey mud. One day Andy's family received a letter from a land developer. The letter announced the developer's plans to build 180 condominium units near the Holleman's home in Chelmsford, Massachusetts. Twelve-year-old Andrew snatched the letter and shouted, "He can't do that! He's talking about building right on top of the wetlands!"

Andy knew that several species living on that land were either endangered or on the Special Concern list of animals whose numbers are shrinking. He had spent much of his free time roaming the area, watching great blue herons bend their long, delicate legs in marshy waters, seeing blue-spotted salamanders slither past shy wood turtles, and hearing the red-tailed hawk's lonely call – *cree, cree*. He often ripped off his baseball cap and waved to salute its graceful flight.

"Mom, you've got to take me to the library," Andy insisted. "I need to find out everything I can about the wetlands. We've got to fight this." At the library, Andy examined the master plan for their town. He dug into state laws. He discovered the exact plans for the condo complex, including that the proposed development sat on a stream which led into Russell Mill Pond. The pond fed into town wells. So it was possible that Chelmsford's drinking water could be contaminated, too. He had his ammunition and he had to do something. He thought of all the living things whose habitats would be destroyed by the condos: the ladyslippers, mountain laurels, fringed gentians, foxes and snakes.

The wetlands were too important to cover with concrete and steel. Andy couldn't allow Pontiacs and Toyotas to replace blue herons and shy wood turtles. He couldn't permit blaring car horns to muffle the *cree* of the red-tailed hawk. "So, I drafted a petition for the residents to sign to try to stop the developer from building," Andy says. "I walked around the neighborhood and collected 180 signatures. I told everyone to come to the public town meeting with the developer."

Andy sent copies of the petition to various officials and wrote letters to senators, representatives, TV reporters, and the Audubon Society, but got no help.

On the night of the town meeting, over 250 people showed up. When the developer stood up and announced that he was the one who had invited everyone, members of the audience disagreed, saying, "No it was Andy Holleman who invited us here." Andy delivered a speech that the residents responded to with thunderous applause. That was just the beginning of the battle for Andy. The meetings continued for another ten months. There were at least two meetings every week and sometimes more. Andy attended every meeting—and he still got high grades in school. He even spoke at most of the meetings. Ten months after he started his campaign to save the wetlands, Andy got the good news that the Board had denied the developer's application to build on the wetlands.

What did all of this mean to Andy? He became a celebrity. Even though he is modest and shy, he accepted invitations to speak at schools, community groups and organizations. He received many awards, including the Young Giraffe Award for young people who "stick their necks out" for the good of others. His award was a free trip to Russia. Andy is planning to go to college where he'd like to study environmental law.

Meanwhile, he's setting up a non-profit fund to purchase the wetlands to preserve it forever. Then he and other people can always wander by Russell Mill Pond, gathering autumn leaves from crimson swamp maples and golden oaks. He can watch the blue herons bend their long, delicate legs in marshy waters, and see blue-spotted salamanders slither safely past shy wood turtles. And he can hear the lonely *cree* of the red-tailed hawk as it soars freely, high above the pond, dipping its wings as if in salute to him.

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