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News / Insight

## Activism bootcamp inspires children: Porter

While we didn't get to rescue birds, touring buildings with the Fatal Light Awareness Program gave kids a lesson in activism.

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CATHERINE PORTER / TORONTO STAR [Order this photo](#)

Paloma Plant, program co-ordinator of FLAP, shows a dead Northern Shrike to Catherine Porter's son, Noah. The bird died this spring after crashing into the window of a downtown building.

By: **Catherine Porter** Columnist, Published on Mon May 25 2015

We were returning from the Toronto zoo on Good Friday, when my daughter said something that caused me to almost drive the car off the DVP.

We'd been speaking about climate change because of the polar bears, casing their muddy enclosure at the zoo.

"What is the government doing about it?" Lyla asked wisely from the back seat. She is 9.

I explained how adults often delay addressing big problems because they are overwhelmed or lazy or indifferent. In the case of the federal government, the cabinet members likely think they'll be dead by the time it's a real problem, I said with contempt.

"What should we do about it?" she asked from the back seat.

That's my kid! I left journalism for a couple years to work full-time on globalization issues. I swore off meat for a decade and was tear-gassed on the streets in Quebec City, protesting the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. She's clearly inherited my activist genes!

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We cycle and take the subway instead of driving, I told her. For years, we've paid extra for small-scale green electricity. We sometimes dry our laundry out on the line . . . My righteousness wilted as I assembled this pathetic catalogue. I have clearly become one of those dithering adults I hold in such contempt.

"We can start going to protests to tell the government they should stop producing so much greenhouse gases," I offered.

"Mom," said Lyla, authoritatively, "protests don't change anything."

That's when I almost plummeted off the highway.

"Protests are the only thing that work," I screamed, knuckles white on the wheel. Slavery! Women's rights! Clayoquot Sound!

Then a miracle happened. I stopped talking long enough to inhale. I calmed down. And I recognized the situation for what it was: a teachable moment.

I wasn't going to convince my daughter that protest works through angry words. I'd have to show her.

I decided to create activism boot camp for Lyla. Over the next few months, I'd introduce her to different activists working on different causes in different ways. We'd go to old-fashioned marches, sure. But we'll also learn about other forms of collective action.

The delicate trick, I realized, would be to give her an intriguing taste but not a force-feeding. For this to inspire her, it would have to seem like an exciting adventure. And she'd have to feel like she'd learned things herself.

That's how, a month later, we found ourselves on Front St. during the early morning rush hour, walking the perimeter of glass and mirror skyscrapers in search of dead or injured birds.

"What do you see in that window?" Paloma Plant asked Lyla, pointing to the gold reflection of the RBC tower. "That's right, the tree across the street. That's what the bird sees. But it doesn't realize this is a window, and it tries to get to that tree."

Plant is co-founder of **FLAP** — the Fatal Light Awareness Program, one of Toronto's most successful activist organizations. Over the past two decades, its members have convinced countless buildings — including the CN Tower — to turn off their white lights at night during migration, and the city to adopt new **bird-friendly building standards**.

The organization was created in 1993, because a group of strangers saw a huge problem that no one was doing anything about. During the spring and fall, hundreds of thousands of birds migrate through the city. Every year, as many as 10 million slam into buildings — drawn by the white lights at night or fooled by reflections of trees or green space in windows during the day, says Michael Mesure, FLAP's executive director.

Only one in three survive, he told us.

"I started coming downtown at night, looking for injured birds, trying to save them," Mesure explained to us.

He was just a regular person like us, who was building an art and antique gallery outside Toronto, in Erin, Ont. "People started to hear about it and came looking for me. Before I knew it, there was a small core group of us."

I'd chosen FLAP for an early session in Lyla's activism boot camp because she likes birds and she might get to rescue one. Could activism get more exciting?



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### From around the web

We spent a week poring over FLAP's "volunteer training manual" during breakfast, slowly absorbing the different elements of the "bander's grip" — the safe way to hold an injured bird without suffocating it.

My 7-year-old son, Noah, got so excited about this that I agreed to bring him along too.

Plant and Mesure led us on a regular volunteer rescue patrol route of the downtown core — from the RBC building to David Pecaut Square then looping back to city hall.

It was a cool, clear-skied morning. The wind funneled through the cliff-like buildings. Few gulls wheeled overhead, Plant pointed out. "That means it's not an active morning for migration," she said.

Gulls eat injured migrating birds, she explained. Volunteers have to beat them there.

We followed them around the edges of buildings, stopping to look at reflective glass or plants in the inside of windows that might seem inviting to birds. We didn't find any injured or dead birds, though.

FLAP volunteers have collected only 368 injured or dead birds this migrating season — half the find of previous years. Mesure doesn't think this is cause for celebration though.

"The fact is, bird populations are plummeting," he said.

When we got to city hall, he pointed out an example of "bird-friendly" glass that likely wouldn't be there if it wasn't for FLAP's efforts. It is striped with white bands running through it. No bird would confuse a reflection there for the real thing.

"We push for change by partnering with politicians and NGOs," he said. "We find it's more effective to work with the industry than protest against them."

So, Lyla won't learn the power of protesting through FLAP. But, she'll hopefully glean some lessons about taking action. As we heard continually during the G20 protests in Toronto, change requires a "multiplicity of tactics."

Mesure and Plant both have kids. They knew mine would leave disappointed. So, they took us to a city hall office, where there is a freezer. That's FLAP's bird morgue. They pulled out one plastic zip-lock bag after another, each holding the broken corpse of a startlingly beautiful bird — an indigo bunting, two scarlet tanagers, a Blackburnian warbler.

"Why do you freeze them?" Lyla asked.

"To show people how many die," Plant answered.

Once a year, they lay all the victims out at the ROM for a [breathtaking exhibit](#) on casual cruelty.

Lyla unwrapped each bird, and held it tenderly in her hands. She didn't say much on the subway ride home. I think it's still sinking in.

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