Reading the Signs: When Will We Ever Learn?

By PHIL ARKOW, Coordinator
The National Link Coalition
The National Resource Center on the Link Between Animal Abuse and Human Violence
Member AVA and the Link Affinity Group
37 Hillside Road, Stratford, NJ 08084
www.NationalLinkCoalition.org
arkowpets@snip.net

Philosophers and researchers have long argued that acts of cruelty to animals committed in childhood and adolescence are often dangerous warning signs, predictors of potential future interpersonal violence. Occasionally a spectacular case crystallizes this concept – which we at the National Link Coalition call The Link between animal abuse and human violence – and brings it to the forefront of public as well as professional attention.

Such a case appears to be emerging in Parkland, Fla., where the 19-year-old expelled student accused of gunning down 17 people on Valentine's Day at his former high school reportedly had a history of bragging about killing animals, and was also abusive to his girlfriend.

The New York *Times* reported that Nikolas Cruz had been obsessed with a girl at the school to the point of stalking her. "In the hours after the shooting, people who knew Mr. Cruz described him as a 'troubled kid' who enjoyed showing off his firearms, bragging about killing animals, and whose mother would resort to calling the police to have them come to their home to try to talk some sense into him," the *Times* reported. Cruz reportedly stayed to himself and had few friends "but struck fear in some students with erratic behavior and an affinity for violence."

The mother of a student told the *Times* that she learned from her daughter's friends that Cruz "was known as always being mentally ill and would kill animals."

The South Florida *Sun Sentinel* reported that another student said Cruz had talked about shooting lizards, squirrels and frogs. Former neighbors said they had seen him shooting at a neighbor's chickens, poking at a rabbit hole with a stick and setting his family's dog on another neighbor's piglets.

"Like we did not expect this!" said John Thompson, Deputy Executive Director/COO of the National Sheriffs' Association and a member of the National Link Coalition's Steering Committee. "It is my understanding he was also on a watch list but I guess no one was watching! Law enforcement better wake up and realize this LINK is real and a VERY powerful tool for them!"

"We missed the signs," Broward Mayor Beam Furr, a former teacher himself, told the Miami *Herald*. "We should have seen some of the signs."