

Tracy girl works to free orca from Argentine park

By Brenda Huang
Tracy Press

In a home on Tracy's James Wright Lane, a 13-year-old girl feels the pain of Kshamenk, a killer whale kept at a theme park in northern Argentina, thousands of miles away. Kshamenk is isolated and lives in a small tank.

"Think of yourself in that situation. You wouldn't want to be locked in a cage," said Ariel Imperato, a seventh-grader at Clover Middle School.

So she's on a crusade. Ariel launched a petition drive for the 16-year-old male orca a week ago and has gathered 64 signatures from friends, teachers, relatives and neighbors.

She wants everyone to sign a letter she wrote to Argentina's president, Nestor Kirchner, to release Kshamenk to the wild, where he lived until 10 years ago.

Ariel's mission started April 3. Surfing the Web and checking a favorite site on whale protection, she ran into the dilemma of Kshamenk — frustrated, angry and depressed, according to www.keiko.com.

Kshamenk was forced ashore with three other killer whales by boats of Mundo Marino, the theme park, and now he's the only one left. Last year his female tank-mate, Belen, died.

"I felt sad, very sad," said Ariel.

Within minutes Ariel

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Tracy seventh-grader

grabbed a pencil, tore a page off a notepad and scribbled a letter. The next day she took the letter to the school, approached friends and teachers and got 20 signatures. In one more day, the number of names rose to 50.

She said she has talked to all students and teachers she knows at the school.

Tony Crivello, who teaches Ariel in a college preparation class that focuses on study skills, was apparently impressed.

"She's a go-getter once she sets her mind on something," Crivello said. "We are 100 percent behind her and we all want to be part of it."

Sitting in a chair in the family's kitchen and holding three black-and-white stuffed killer whales in her lap, Ariel said she has liked these animals since age 3 after watching "Free Willy," a movie about a killer whale called Willy. She said she likes them because they are pretty.

Under the gaze of her mother Shanna Lopez, Ariel counted the times she had seen real killer whales: on the yearly trip to Vallejo's Six Flags Marine World, and on a trip to



Hime Romero/Tracy Press

ON A MISSION: Tracy's Ariel Imperato holds up a petition she started to free a killer whale named Kshamenk that has been in captivity in Argentina for more than a decade.

San Diego's Sea World — last year's birthday present from her family — where she had dinner 3 feet away from a killer whale tank and got soaked by the water the whales splashed.

These days Ariel feels even more connected to orcas as she reads her letter again and again before asking peo-

ple to sign.

Neighbor Amanda Brown signed. The co-workers of her stepfather, Joseph Lopez, who carpool with him to a Fremont auto factory, signed. Her grandfather Richard Imperato and his colleagues at a Reno casino signed.

Now Ariel wants to get on the news. She said she would

contact newspapers and television stations in the area and beyond, an idea suggested by her mother.

"I want to collect as many signatures as possible," she said. Ariel said she would spend "As much as possible" on her cause every day.

"When your homework is done," Lopez added.