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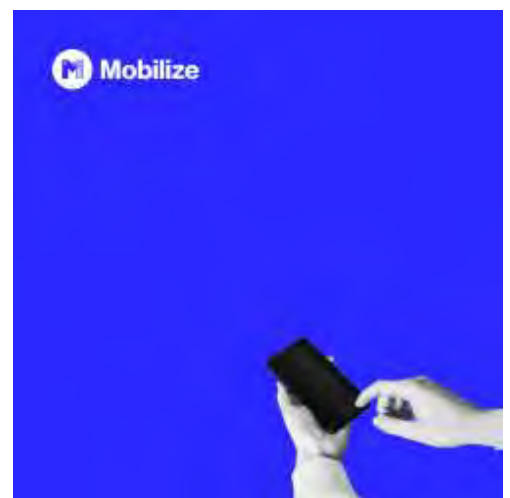
# Inside Philanthropy

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## Inside the Growing Effort to Bring Diversity to the “Very White” Animal Welfare Field

Michael Kavate

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About two years ago, Chetana Mirle and her colleagues started calling up contacts, trying to answer a question that had long troubled them and others in animal welfare: Why was their movement so lacking in diversity?

Mirle had recently joined [Life of Riley](#), a grantmaking program of [Spring Point Partners](#) focused on animal breeding, after spending more than a decade at Humane Society International. As she spoke with people, they kept suggesting she speak to one person—James Evans.

At that point, Evans was not, technically, even in the animal welfare movement. He was running a communications shop. But over the years, the firm had done a variety of acclaimed campaigns on the welfare of companion animals. And all of them, whether the topic was puppy mills or spay-neuter, uplifted themes of diversity, equity and inclusion.

So in March 2020, still weeks before George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery became household names that ignited a nationwide reckoning with systemic racism in American society, Mirle made an initial planning grant to Evans. His pitch? Not a series of workshops or another outreach campaign, but a brand new group.

The result is [CARE](#), an organization uniquely dedicated to addressing organizational and personal

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biases in the companion animal welfare movement. Born just as a national movement brought about new awareness of longstanding racial inequities, CARE is one of the groups at the forefront of a growing push to diversify the predominantly white animal welfare field.

CARE, which stands for Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity, and [Encompass](#), a similar group in the farmed animal space, both seek to foster diversity and inclusion within the animal welfare movement through a focus on transforming the organizations and people who work in the field. They follow in the footsteps of consultants such as [A. Breeze Harper](#) and [Krista Hiddema](#), who support groups in such work, as well as a broad range of nonprofits, particularly in the food movement, that approach animal welfare with a racial justice lens.

“There wasn’t anyone doing this work in quite this way. I felt like [Evans] was someone we could learn from, and that the animal welfare movement could learn from,” said Mirle, who is Indian American. She emphasized that she and her team were anything but experts in these topics. “We don’t even know how to talk about this issue yet.”

For Evans, the mission stretches far beyond racial and ethnic bias. He’s quick to rattle off a long list of groups that face discrimination when they seek to adopt: senior citizens, renters, homebound individuals, people facing homelessness, people who work long hours, households with young children.

“It’s really about bringing new people into animal welfare,” he told me. “There are literally millions of

animals that would be adopted if we could just move past seeing people as less-than.”

## **The Animal Welfare Movement is “Very White”**

Very little demographic data is available on the people who work in animal welfare, whether by race or any other measure. But among the half-dozen-plus animal welfare funders and nonprofit leaders I spoke to, nearly everyone noted the striking lack of ethnic diversity. At least two used the phrase “very white.”

One of the few studies addressing racial representation in the animal welfare movement is a [2005 research paper](#) by Sue-Ellen Brown, who in the second sentence notes “no peer-reviewed research studies on this specific topic could be located.” Brown did a telephone survey of 32 animal welfare organizations, but found that “almost all organizations were reluctant to respond.” Among the 13 organizations that ultimately did, only 4% of their nearly 1,600 employees were Black, and about two-thirds of the groups had no Black employees at all.

Some people assume there are different levels of interest in animals among different ethnic groups, but there’s no solid research to back up those assertions, according to Brown. Andrew Rowan, a longtime animal advocate who serves on the board of Animal Grantmakers, agreed. In fact, he told me an abundance of polling data shows similar rates of interest in animals across demographics. Black and white households, for instance, even feed stray cats at roughly the same rates.

And yet, the mostly white movement has mostly ignored its own lack of diversity. “It hasn’t been something that at all has been a focus for the traditional U.S.-based animal welfare community,” said Kathleen Savesky Buckley, a consultant who has held positions at a wide range of organizations and foundations focused on animal welfare.

But this year, the national reckoning on the impact of systemic racism has pushed animal welfare funders and nonprofits to issue statements on Black Lives Matter and reexamine their practices. Buckley, who is white, said she’s seen a surge in interest in diversity and inclusion trainings.

“It’s on everyone’s radar now,” said Shelly Thompson, who is director of grants for [Maddie’s Fund](#), which funded one of James Evans’ most well-known campaigns before he started CARE. Thompson, who is white, says she sees the beginnings of a shift in the field.

“We’ve known for a long time that the animal welfare movement is very white, but we’re starting to have conversations we haven’t had before,” she told me. “We’re really having those extensive conversations that a lot of the policies that we have are really excluding communities of color.”

## **How CARE Aims to Achieve Its Goals**

CARE takes a three-pronged approach to confronting bias and lack of diversity in the companion animal field. As one might expect from an organization born out of a communications agency, one focus is narrative.

“One of the biggest problems is that there are no positive narratives, really, about people of color inside animal welfare,” said Evans, who is African American. He notes that most narratives about pets, particularly films, feature white men, even though statistics show the primary caretakers of animals, regardless of race or class, are women.

Another emphasis is research. CARE is partnering with Harvard University’s Project Implicit, the image association test popularized by Malcolm Gladwell’s book “Blink.” The group is also working with the University of Tennessee to explore how bias impacts animal welfare.

The third prong is to offer trainings on diversity and inclusion for staff and leadership in the movement. Evans emphasizes that such courses are not an end in themselves, but serve as conversation starters. “You can’t take, in this country, hundreds of years of oppression, hundreds of years of inequity, not just for people of color, not just for women, but transgender people, gay and lesbians, and others... You can’t undo that in a two- or three-hour training course.”

The overarching vision for the organization, which now has six staff, is to create what Evans calls CARE centers. He wants to reimagine the current shelter system to put more power in the hands of communities. He envisions centers serving as sources of local employment, helping people become dog trainers and veterinarians, and offering more holistic services to those who come in for support.

It’s an ambitious goal for a new organization, let alone one still building a support base. Life of Riley is

CARE’s only funder to date, though the group is starting to get inquiries from organizations and brands in the animal welfare space for consulting work, and recently signed a contract to do market research and diversity training for Best Friends Animal Society. AdoptaPet.com has also provided in-kind support, as well as serving as CARE’s fiscal sponsor.

## **CARE’s Forerunner in the Farmed Animal Movement**

Aryenish Birdie has been part of the animal protection field for more than 20 years. She’s worked on a wide range of issues, with a focus on animal testing and farmed animals, but one commonality has persisted throughout her career.

“I’ve found I’m one of the only people of color in the room, especially among groups that are more well-funded,” said Birdie, who is South Asian.

So in 2017, after a series of interviews with leaders and others within the farmed animal welfare space, she founded Encompass, a nonprofit dedicated to expanding racial diversity and inclusivity within that movement. While there are other nonprofits focused on racial justice within the broader animal welfare field, Birdie and others I spoke with said they believe Encompass, like CARE, is the first group to focus on organizations within the movement.

“They are the main driver, honestly, in the farmed animal space,” said Che Green, the founder and former executive of the nonprofit animal advocacy research group Faunalytics, who now works as a consultant.

For its first few years, Encompass survived on a shoestring, thanks to a handful of philanthropic donors, as well as contributions from individual donors. Like CARE, the group’s work with organizations, including consultations and tailored reports, is done on a fee-for-service basis.

But earlier this year, the group received its first six-figure gift: a two-year, \$200,000 grant from Open Philanthropy Project, which enabled Birdie to hire a part-time assistant. Other supporters include Dr. Bronner’s, [Animal Charity Evaluators](#) and the [Effective Altruism Animal Welfare Fund](#).

The national uprisings that spread across the nation this summer following the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others have, unsurprisingly, brought a lot more people to her virtual door. “The amount of requests for support has been through the roof,” she said. “For the month of June, I had to put in a permanent slow-to-respond message.”

Some of those contacts demonstrated the blind spots that still exist. Several people asked her for unpaid consultations to review their statements on Floyd’s killing and the Black Lives Matter movement. “Without recognizing that that is a burden in itself without offering compensation,” she said. Yet the past few months have also been the group’s most successful on record in terms of fundraising.

“I’m very happy that more people are aware of systemic racism and white supremacy,” she told me. “At the same time, I do have this feeling: Where were



all of you three months ago? Nothing has actually changed.”

## **A Hot-and-Cold Reception**

This past summer has also left Evans with mixed emotions. On the one hand, he’s been buoyed by all the people who have reached out with praise and to offer support. He’s met many people of color who work in the industry “who feel like this is the first time anyone has recognized their existence.”

Evans has had more than 40 speaking engagements over the past three months, including leading a discussion with Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson, and he’s speaking on a panel at Animal Grantmakers’ virtual conference next month. Mirle, too, said she’s seen a “tremendous” amount of support for CARE from the animal welfare community. Yet there have also been surprises.

“Some of the biggest names in animal welfare have not reached out to us at all. These are folks we have actually done work for, started projects, started programs,” Evans told me. “There’s been no supportive outreach in terms of, ‘I’m glad you’re in this space, how can we help? How do you think you can help us?’ To me, it’s shocking.”

Like Birdie, he’s been hit with the reality of being a person of color in the field. “It’s been accelerated microaggressions,” as he put it. And similar to researcher Brown, he’s encountered a lot of hesitancy as he does outreach to organizations in the field, particularly those that are not diverse. “It’s almost like you want to clean the house before you invite the maid

over, and I think that’s part of the problem,” Evans said.

Mirle believes philanthropy can best advance this discussion by building its own awareness. She includes herself and her organization in that journey. “At this moment, the key is learning. Really listening deeply, just really deep listening right now, and listening to voices that haven’t already been heard—which doesn’t mean we can’t take action,” she said.

While Evans, of course, would rather have seen CARE take off for reasons other than the tragedies of this year, he is clear that such events have filled the sails of his organization. For the sake of all those currently being excluded, he wants CARE to make the most of it.

“We don’t know how long this George Floyd wind is going to push the boat, but we are going to do as much as we can while people are listening,” Evans said.

“We’re going to know in a year who is about window dressing and who is serious.”

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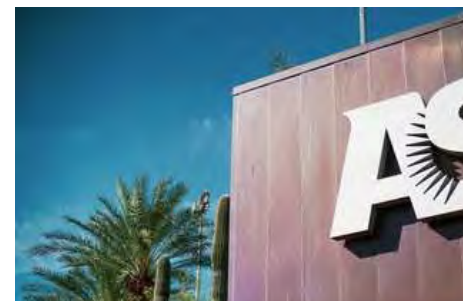
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