

Field Trip

BY KATINA ANTONIADES

Locust Dale, Virginia

The organization: Siamese Cat Rescue Center

Year established: 1998

Resources: Two staff members at the center located in Virginia; about 500 active volunteers, including 75 foster home providers in several states

Area served: Eastern United States

Animals helped: The group places 800 to 1,000 Siamese and Siamese mixes each year. Last summer, it took in its 5,000th cat, a 12-year-old stray now named Blue.

Website: va.siameserescue.org

How it helps shelters: The group helps public shelters with their Siamese cats; volunteers take cats shelters cannot place and help advertise the ones who remain at the shelter by sending information to a targeted group of potential adopters. “Meezers,” as Siamese are nicknamed, are housed both at the center—which can hold up to 50 cats—and with trained foster caregivers across the organization’s service area. “[The facility] looks like a garage from the outside, but it’s probably the most expensive garage you’ll ever walk into,” jokes executive director Siri Zwemke. Siri runs the organization with husband Darrell Zwemke, “webmeezer” and vice president of the board.

On the road: Hundreds of volunteer drivers give lifts to adoptees on their way to new homes. Each cat’s online adoption listing specifies a “transport region” based on the location of her foster home; the area usually extends to surrounding states. “As an applicant applies through our system, they input their zip code and



SIAMESE CAT RESCUE CENTER

it pops up the region in which they can select a cat if they need transport assistance,” says Siri. “We try to localize as much as possible, especially with the price of gas now—that’s becoming somewhat limiting,” adds Darrell. But the group allows for long-distance love: People can adopt cats outside their region, but they have to pick them up themselves.

Siamese sounds: The breed’s distinctive meows and extra-talkative nature can give potential adopters the wrong impression, says Darrell. “They present poorly in shelter environments,” he says. “They sound like they’re angry Many times, [adopters] misunderstand their yelling and screaming as vicious when they’re just basically four-letter Siamese words.” It didn’t take long for the center’s kitties to speak for themselves: As Darrell continued to describe his organization over the phone, they began uttering their distinctive meows in the background—clipped, low, and hoarse noises that sound like “Raow!”

A new kind of adopter: Darrell has noticed changes in adopters’ expectations. “It’s not the same adopter you used to have five years ago that was very rescue-

savvy,” he says. He believes the difference is partly due to Hurricane Katrina: After the storm, he says, “we told the whole world, ‘Go to rescue,’ and they did, but they didn’t know what to expect.” Some people believe the cats will be perfect, Siri adds. No matter what adopters’ attitudes are, though, the group enables successful placements through education, careful matchmaking, and thorough post-adoption follow-up.

Ensuring longevity: As the organization has grown, its structure has changed. Today, 14 regional coordinators handle assigned areas, performing duties that include determining which cats the group takes in, assigning those cats to foster homes, improving volunteer retention, and participating in fundraising and events. The Zwemkes hope to increase this “outsourcing” to make the organization less dependent on the central office. “Our long-term goal is to make us not necessary,” he says. “At least not as necessary, because we’re not going to be here forever. We’d like the organization to continue beyond us.” That seems a likely possibility—Siri says she’s inspired by the dedication and compassion of the group’s volunteers.