



Solving a Multiplication Problem

West Virginia group aims to save feral kitties

Back around Christmastime, Judy Deem noticed that one of the feral cats she was caring for had a big knot on her knee. Feral cats being what they are, "It took me a month and a half to catch her, and I got tore up twice trying to," Deem recalls. "I mean, it's like grabbing the wrong end of a chainsaw."

Finally, the cat grew weak enough for Deem to capture her. But the knot turned out to be cancer, which took her life.

Though the story has a sad ending, Deem says it shows what she and the other volunteers at the Parkersburg, W.Va.-based nonprofit Save A Kitty Feral Cat Program are all about—working to improve the lives of a class of cats that is often undervalued and misunderstood.

The group, founded in July 2004 by Kandi Habeb, practices trap-neuter-return for feral and free-roaming cats in the Parkersburg area. It also rehomes cats who are young enough to be socialized, and sometimes arranges for minimal emergency care. In four and a half years, Save A Kitty has spayed or neutered more than 800 cats, rehomed about 200, and developed a list of 500-plus waiting for spay/neuter surgeries. The group is run by a dozen active volunteers, Deem says, aided by others who feed and monitor feral cat colonies throughout an area that includes one large West Virginia county and stretches into Ohio.

Save A Kitty has no facility of its own and receives no city or county funding, relying largely on homegrown fundraisers such as garage sales, bingos, and donation jars. The group also holds food drives, applies for grants, and takes donations through its website, saveakitty.org.



SAVE A KITTY FERAL CAT PROGRAM



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These cats are among the hundreds of ferals and strays that Save A Kitty Feral Cat Program, a nonprofit based in Parkersburg, W.Va., has trapped, neutered, and returned to their colonies.

Save A Kitty volunteers Carol Hanna, Pat Elias, and Linda Miller help spread the word about the group's work during Walk Your Paws, an event sponsored by the Parkersburg Humane Society at a city park in West Virginia.

When it sponsors a spay/neuter clinic, the group pays for the supplies and gets local veterinarians to donate their time. In particular, the Mineral Wells Veterinary Clinic led by veterinarian Leslie Elliott has been "a real blessing to our group," says Deem.

Save A Kitty volunteers clean cages and register cats at the clinics, and Deem, a retired schoolteacher, says she sometimes becomes a veterinary technician—giving vaccines, preparing cats for surgery, and doing the ear-tipping that identifies the cats as spayed or neutered. Since that qualifies as a surgical procedure, she's even had the satisfaction of going home to her husband of 40 years and saying, "You know, I am really tired. I've been in surgery all day."

Habeb started Save A Kitty after spotting feral cats who were hungry, says Deem, the organization's education coordinator. "She started feeding them, and then [realized] that feeding them isn't enough," she explains. "You can feed them all you want, but it's not gonna solve the problem, because they're gonna continue to multiply, and there are gonna be more to feed."

The group takes its spay/neuter message to the public via tables set up at local stores. Deem finds that some people harbor misconceptions about feral cats—believing, for example, that ferals surrendered to a shelter are likely to be adopted out to new homes. Feral cats are difficult to tame, and shouldn't be caged in an animal shelter, she says, "where there are dogs barking and other cats and people going around. These cats will freak out. ... There is really nothing much they can do at the shelter level besides euthanizing them, but it's not an acceptable solution. They should be spayed and neutered, and returned back to where they were living."

Deem says the local feral cat population appears to be decreasing, but progress is slow because the group can't spay or neuter every cat, and those it can't reach are out there "doing what cats do." But she remains optimistic: "This problem didn't happen in four years. It took a lot more than four years to get us to where we are now. And it's gonna take a while, but I'm thinking in 10 years total we're gonna really see a difference."