

To the Rescue!

BY NANCY PETERSON



Saving Oreo

A kitten named for a cookie gets a sweet home

Two weeks old, the tiny black-and-white kitten was barely alive. And if the apartment manager at the Atlanta complex where he lived with his mother and several other feral cats had anything to say about it, he wouldn't be alive much longer: The resident who had fed the cats for the past year or two was moving out, and the manager had threatened to have them killed once she was gone.

Concerned about the dire situation, the resident contacted rescuer Deb Smith-Callahan, who touched base with Elisabeth Gambil-Niksich, a friend and fellow rescuer/caretaker of feral cats. They took action—trapping, sterilizing, and relocating many of the cats to a safe site.

But one little kitten was cold, dehydrated, and unable to breathe. Gambil-Niksich cradled the kitten in her hand and

tried to bottle feed him, but he was too weak to nurse.

She rushed him to a veterinary hospital. He was admitted as "Oreo," which she thought was a perfect name for a cat with his coloring. Oreo received warmed subcutaneous fluids, antibiotics, and forced feeding before being placed in an incubator. "The doctor told me it would be a miracle if he lived through the night," says Gambil-Niksich.

The next day, Oreo was alive, improved, and ready to be picked up. But she wasn't sure what she was going to do for him next. "I already had three pet cats and cared for three feral cats on my property," Gambil-Niksich says.

Oreo and his mom weren't the first cats to benefit from Gambil-Niksich's attention. She's been working with feral cats in Roswell—a suburb of Atlanta—for 10 years.

Her interest in their situation was sparked one night when she found a dead kitten, likely struck by a car, lying in the street in her neighborhood.

"I thought, 'Gosh, how tragic—someone letting out a little kitten who can't even defend itself, and now it's already dead.' I put it by the side of a house, near the place it was killed," she says.

That's when she started to notice all the stray cats populating the suburb. "They were wild; you couldn't get near them," she says.

She began researching and found out that Atlanta and its suburbs are rife with feral cats, according to Gambil-Niksich. "They're everywhere. People are dumping animals. They dump them in parks, they leave their apartment complexes and dump them outside. It's rampant," she says. Eventually, with help from a caring neighbor, she started her own trap-neuter-return project.

"We estimate that there were 40-50 cats in the neighborhood. We trapped, neutered and returned about 25. We took in what we could, but others eluded us, and we never saw them again," she says.

Gambil-Niksich also took on the job of caretaker for a feral colony of 10-11 cats who lived near her home. It's been an expensive proposition; at a minimum, TNR involves trapping, spaying and neutering, vaccinating against rabies, ear tipping, and returning feral cats to their territory where a caretaker can provide food, water, shelter, and monitoring. Gambil-Niksich volunteers at the Good Mews Animal Foundation, a nonprofit, limited-admission cat shelter in Marietta, Ga., and she is on the Feral Friends Network of Alley Cat Allies, serving as a resource for people helping feral cats in her area.

And she cares for the three remaining cats in the feral colony near her home that she has monitored for years. There



ELISABETH GAMBIL-NIKSICH

Oreo, a feral kitty found living outside an Atlanta apartment complex, received shelter and care at a veterinary hospital, where staff fought to save his life.



JOHN DIERKS

Deborah Dierks, the veterinary technician who adopted Oreo, snuggles with her furry family members (left to right): brown tabby Gabriel, Wilson (formerly Oreo), Indiana the dog, and Maverick.

are two male cats, Romeo and Brutus, and a female cat she calls Tail.

"I've spent thousands and thousands of dollars out of my own pocket for spay/neuter and vaccinations. I've gone into my savings a lot," she says.

How does her husband feel about this?

"He doesn't ask [how much I'm spending] anymore, and I don't tell."

And she was willing to invest her time, compassion, and money in the feral kitten named Oreo. When he deteriorated after his initial vet visits, Gambil-Niksich rushed him back to the hospital for intensive care. Even with the discount the veterinarian offered her, her out-of-pocket expenses totaled more than \$550.

She admits that it was an unusual amount of money to spend to save one kitten. Typically, she only has to pay for feral cats to be de-wormed and get flea treatments.

She wasn't the only one pulling for him. Deborah Dierks, one of the veterinary technicians taking care of him, was smitten and agreed to monitor his progress. She took him home, where she fed him every two hours and monitored his breathing during the night. She revived him twice.

"If it weren't for Deborah's tender care, Oreo would have died," Gambil-Niksich says.

He was still sick when she visited the hospital the next day, but on the road to recovery. And to her delight, Dierks wanted to adopt him.

In addition to his new home, he got a new name: Wilson. He now sleeps on his owner's pillow and snuggles with dog buddy Indiana and kitty friends Maverick and Gabriel. "He's about 8 pounds now. Deb's absolutely in love with him," Gambil-Niksich says, adding that the cat's mother has been moved out of Roswell and has a caretaker of her own.

Meanwhile, Gambil-Niksich's work with feral cats continues.

"I don't know what it is about feral cats; they just have a real affinity for me. I feel that they are the forgotten ones—people think of them as trash," Gambil-Niksich says. "But each of them has the cat's own personality, his own will to live ... they are individuals. As long as they come to me, I'll help them." AS

For more info on ferals, go to humane-society.org/feralcats.

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