Karene Brewis and a feral jetty cat enjoy a sunny day at the ocean. MARK WELTHAGEN

People Power

BY NANCY PETERSON

Karene Brewis

In 2006, Angelina Jolie gave birth to baby Shiloh in Swakopmund, Namibia. The visit helped put the popular holiday destination on the international map, but Jolie's not the only interloper making tracks there: Karene Brewis is in town trying to *stop* births—of cats, not humans. Scores of feral cats roam the area, now with Brewis close behind.

In 1995, Brewis abandoned the high-powered corporate environment of Johannesburg, South Africa, and relocated to Swakopmund, Namibia's second largest town, where she ran a medical wholesale business until 2005. After the business closed, Brewis began leading walking tours around the older parts of the town—and now she also devotes four hours a day to feeding and caring for various feral cat colonies in the area.

How she got catty: Her involvement with feral cats started when she began running errands on foot in order to save gasoline and adjust to her simplified lifestyle. While taking a shortcut through a fragrant municipal garden, she saw a small black-and-white cat come out from under a bush.

"He did not seem scared of me, and I realized that he was a feral cat. I had vaguely heard mention of these cats living in the older areas of Swakopmund," she says. When Brewis saw him again a few days later, she ran home and brought back bread and warm milk, thinking he looked hungry. The next evening, she bought cat food to feed him and a few of his buddies. By the fifth evening, she was feeding 28 cats.

The kitty project hasn't been easy on her meager finances. Brewis has sold her corporate wardrobe to finance her feral cat feedings, and has cut down on her own food costs. "All trapping, taking to the veterinarian, and releasing is done by me," she explains.

Her work is complicated by the fact that there is only one private veterinary practice in Swakopmund, and one state veterinarian 30 kilometers away. She manages about 60 cats in eight colonies, feeding them and bringing them in for sterilization to vets as far away as 70 kilometers north in Henties Bay. She is making an impact: There were more than 100 cats when she began her enterprise.

Up with the dawn—and the kitties: Her typical day begins early—after people walk their dogs and before the town wakes up. She follows a circular route that starts with the oldest feral cat colony. "I have a signal which I use—this is tapping an empty bowl against a wall; and they all come running if they haven't already heard the van," Brewis says. She provides food and fresh water, makes sure the bowls are clean, checks on the cats, and moves on to the next colony—though she may linger to give a tummy scratch to a willing recipient.

Later in her day, Brewis answers correspondence and speaks to people about managing feral cats. In the past, she also spent several hours a day caring for the cats who live near one of the town's beach jetties and educating passersby. But the jetty area can be dangerous; since Brewis was robbed there last March, she still takes care of the cats, but doesn't linger.

Nevertheless, she has found other ways to bring awareness to the community. Back in October, she was interviewed on the radio about her cause, and the segment was simultaneously translated for the predominantly German community. "We have many retired Germans living here as well as a large German population, so I need to create awareness amongst them. Most of them are animal lovers," she says.

Gaining kitty company: Brewis is not entirely alone in her efforts. The Cat Protection Society (CPS), founded in Windhoek about 12 years ago, has funded two sterilization events in Swakopmund, and plans to continue while it has the funds. Two and a half years ago, Brewis started the only other branch of CPS in Namibia—but she's solely responsible for her branch's fundraising.

During the annual three-day Erongo Trade Expo, she sold cakes, raffle tickets, tea, and coffee. The expo generated $179 after expenses, and gained two new members for her recently formed Feral Cat Club. Brewis' goals for the club include getting as many voices as possible to speak positively about cats, and bringing local cat lovers together to form a feeding committee. She continues to look for people who can help with feedings.

Despite the challenges of the work, Brewis is grateful. "Much water has gone under the bridge since my first encounter with a feral. I would not change a day."

To learn about what you can do to help feral cats, visit humanesociety.org/feralcats.