



CAT-SPECIFIC RESCUE GROUPS MAKE HUGE
STRIDES IN THE QUEST TO SAVE LIVES

the feline focus

BY LAURA MOSS



"SINCE MOST OF OUR CATS ARE LIVING TO ALMOST 20, WE'RE SEEING THIS HUGE GAP IN PLACEMENT FOR SENIOR CATS. THAT'S WHY WE STARTED 'SAVE OUR SENIORS.'"
~ SHELLEY THAYER, CAT DEPOT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Virgil

PHOTO BY CONNIE SUMMERS PHOTOGRAPHY



Earlier this year, a senior cat called Virgil wound up at a Florida animal services facility. He was estimated to be 15 years old and therefore unadoptable, and was slated to be killed. That's when Cat Depot, a Florida-based rescue group, found Virgil and brought him into the organization's Save Our Seniors program.

Cat Depot's executive director, Shelley Thayer, says, "In our own county, most organizations do not take a cat who's over eight or ten years of age. Since most of our cats are living to almost 20, we're seeing this huge gap in placement for senior cats. That's why we started Save Our Seniors."

Virgil, a sociable kitty who loves to be held, quickly made himself at home at Cat Depot. He took frequent walks around the building in a harness, and if he wasn't out on a walk or curled up in a lap, you'd likely find him in a volunteer's arms. "You could pass him from person to person, and he would just be purring," Shelley says. "We knew it would be hard to get him adopted because he's older, but he was so sweet and we were happy to give him a home for as long as he needed it."

Virgil's stay at the shelter turned out to be shorter than expected. Cat Depot posted his information on Petfinder.com, and a woman who'd lost her senior cat miraculously recognized him and got in touch. "It turned out Virgil's name was Carlton," Shelley says. "The



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TREE HOUSE HUMANE SOCIETY AND SPRUNG PHOTO

woman and her husband came in and called the cat's name, and he came running. She told us he's 17 years old — not 15. I just love that story because he was going to be euthanized, and at 17 he ended up back with his family again." If not for Cat Depot, Carlton's story likely wouldn't have had a happy ending at all.

"I truly believe that cats are the underdogs of animal rescue," Shelley says. "Until we change the statistic that most of the animals euthanized in shelters are cats, there's a lot of work to be done."

Luckily, there are numerous cat-specific rescue groups throughout the country that are working hard to change this statistic — not only for senior cats, but also for other at-risk feline populations and, in fact, for all cats who enter their doors. By dedicating their resources solely to cats, they're saving lives and making huge strides in the quest to reach no-kill.

Serving the community

An estimated 60 percent of the animals killed in shelters are cats. That's roughly 1.2 million



Views of Tree House Humane Society, with a cat named Johnnie taking a stroll around the building



per year. Dismal statistics like this are why Kerri Burns, interim director of Chicago's Tree House Humane Society, says we need cat-specific rescue groups. "In the history of shelters," she says, "the biggest focus was always with dogs." After all, back in the day, they were called dog pounds, not cat pounds. Even though shelters are killing fewer animals overall today, it's clear that cats benefit greatly from rescue groups that focus exclusively on TLC for felines.

The groups that work specifically with cats often initially form to handle the

immediate needs of felines in their communities. Arizona's Fearless Kitty Rescue is one such group. In 2012, Paula Stefan, one of Fearless Kitty Rescue's founders, was volunteering with an organization that decided to concentrate its efforts on trap-neuter-return (TNR) instead of focusing outright on adoptions. However, the group already had several cats in its care, so Paula and fellow volunteer Kim Kamins started their own rescue group to take responsibility for those homeless kitties.

"The actual cat in Fearless Kitty's logo is



Here are a few of the felines who were adopted from Magicats: Joe West (above), Dallas and Phoenix (right), and Kallie Kitty (far right). Since Magicats was created, the group has worked with nearly 2,000 cats.



one of those first cats we saved,” Paula says. “Her name is Karma, and her head’s up like she can conquer everything. We had just rescued her, so we basically illustrated her and added a cape. We laugh because we had cats before we even had a rescue group, and now five years later we’ve got 70 cats in our care. At the time, I don’t think we realized how powerful Karma’s image would come to be.”

Magicats, a rescue group in the Magic Valley area of south-central Idaho, is another organization that responds in response to the needs of the community. Because of its feline focus, Magicats is able to provide services that were virtually nonexistent in the region before. “Small towns with rural values have a difficult time providing any kind of welfare services for cats,” says Magicats logistics coordinator Betti Taylor. “In the Magic Valley, only the overcrowded humane society even served cats, and euthanasia is the all-too-often solution for any cat unlucky enough to get caught in the system.”

So, in 2010, Betti and some colleagues of varied backgrounds (a retired military nurse, a convenience store manager and

a horse trainer, just to name a few) started Magicats and became, as Betti puts it, “the eight old ladies who thought there should be something better for cats.” She says, “Eight old ladies’ remains a wonderful, innocuous, mostly unobstructed way for us to quietly go about our business of trying to change the local world for cats.”

And change it they did. Since Magicats was created, these eight women have worked with nearly 2,000 cats — fostering them, finding homes for them, establishing a TNR program and, ultimately, transforming local people’s attitudes. “Over the last eight years, we’ve seen Idahoans in this part of the state begin to wake up and realize that cats are among those (pets) who should be cared for,” Betti says.

Shorter stays, more adoptions

By focusing solely on felines, cat-specific rescue groups are able to truly customize the care they provide, which can contribute to shorter stays and more adoptions.

“Feline-only rescue groups can offer a more cat-friendly, tailored experience,” says

Lisa Johns, shelter manager of Good Mews, a Georgia-based no-kill cat rescue group. “(These) organizations become well-versed in all things cat, including handling, medical treatment and behavior. For example, introducing cats into a stressful environment can cause fear, illness and even misplaced aggression, making them much less likely to be adopted. A cats-only rescue group can provide a less stressful atmosphere, which can cut down on a cat’s length of stay.”

The best practices developed at these rescue groups often have far-reaching effects, according to Shelley. “We’ve learned a lot of different techniques, using clicker training and behavior modification, to get hard-to-place cats into homes,” she says. “We’re always trying to improve our own practices and then share those practices with other organizations.”

This type of specialization also allows cat-specific rescue groups to dedicate resources to feline populations that are often overlooked. Those populations include not only senior cats like Virgil (aka Carlton), but also cats with health issues such as diabetes, feline

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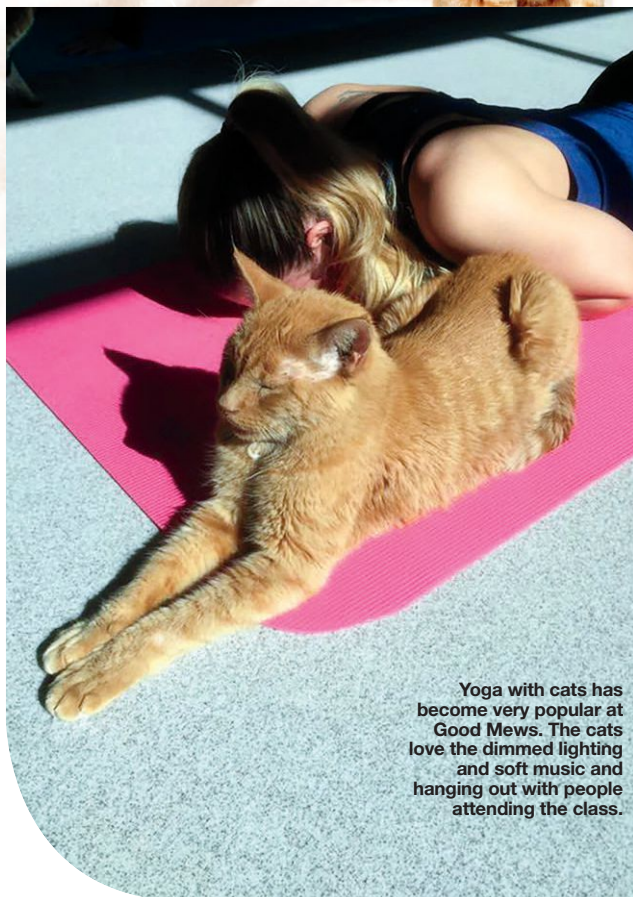
Beautiful Marta arrived at Good Mews timid and malnourished after living outside in a makeshift shelter with too many cats. She was adopted in March by a loving family.



Good Mews has a program in which kids in grades 1-8 read aloud to cats. The kids gain confidence in their reading skills while the cats get snuggles and the chance to socialize.



Handsome Irwin was rescued from a hoarding situation. Good Mews helped Irwin get healthy, and he found his forever home with another Good Mews cat in June.



Yoga with cats has become very popular at Good Mews. The cats love the dimmed lighting and soft music and hanging out with people attending the class.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GOOD MEWS

CAT-SPECIFIC RESCUE GROUPS ARE ON THE FRONT LINES,
AND THEIR EFFORTS ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE AS
WE WORK TOGETHER TO END THE KILLING IN SHELTERS.



PiDay at Tree House
Humane Society

PHOTO COURTESY OF TREE HOUSE HUMANE SOCIETY



immunodeficiency virus (FIV) or feline leukemia. In fact, some cat rescue groups work exclusively with felines who are sick or injured or have behavioral issues that would prevent them from being adopted in shelters.

“Our cats do stay with us longer because they need a longer treatment period, but they’re deserving of it,” says Kerri. “I think when you’re working with a specific animal — whether it’s a cat or a dog or a rabbit — you can focus your resources solely on that and help the animals that most shelters wouldn’t take in or even think about.”

Community cats are another underserved feline population that benefits from the efforts of cat-specific rescue groups. These organizations often have extensive TNR and public education programs to improve the lives of not only the cats themselves, but also the people in their communities. “We

understand that we need to educate people and explain why we have this no-kill philosophy as a rescue group,” says Paula. “I think doing that and helping people understand community cats and TNR will help us get to no-kill. The cats are just being cats, so this work needs to start with us humans.”

Making every day PiDay

Cat-specific rescue groups are on the front lines of this work, and their daily efforts are making a difference in their communities and in the nation as a whole as we work together to end the killing in shelters. But most important of all, their specialized work is making a difference every single day in the lives of the individual cats they rescue — cats like PiDay.

“PiDay came in on March 14, so that’s how he got his name,” Kerri says, referring to

the day on the calendar set aside to recognize the mathematical constant of pi (commonly approximated as the number 3.14). “This poor cat was so matted that he couldn’t move. He could barely open his mouth. He was emaciated. We started shaving his hair to get the mats out, and it was like he was having a massage. You could see that if he could’ve said ‘thank you,’ he would’ve said it a million times that day.”

So how is he doing today? “It’s been two months now, and he’s walking around, he’s purring, and he just wants to be in people’s laps,” Kerri says. “He went from ‘I can’t tell you how much this hurts, and I need help’ to him showing his gratitude each and every day. Rescue groups like ours take in cats like PiDay who really need that extra bit of help. That’s what the cat rescue community does. For us, it’s PiDay every day.” 🐾