City of Cats

HOW JERSEY CITY'S ANIMAL ADVOCATES WORK TO MANAGE THE PROBELM OF HOMELESS FELINES

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I've been feeding the cats.

It started the week after Thanksgiving, when I came in the back door of my apartment building and found a ginger-hued feline with gold eyes picking through the trash cans. A few days later I saw another one, a scrawny little black and white thing that was a dead ringer for one of the kitties that lives with me and my husband. I had seen a third recently too, an all-black mama that lurked in the shadows around our block, and wondered if they were acquainted. Maybe even related.

So I did what any fan of the blog Cat Saturday would do: I snapped a few pictures and posted them on Facebook. Then I started contacting nearby shelters: People for Animals, Jersey Animal Coalition, Sean Casey Animal Rescue in Brooklyn.

My email spiel went something like this: *I have found three cats at my apartment building in Jersey City. One is friendly, chatty and affectionate. Another is an older kitten, scared but curious, and the third is kind of a mystery, possibly feral. Can you please take one or more in, or advise me about what to do with them?*

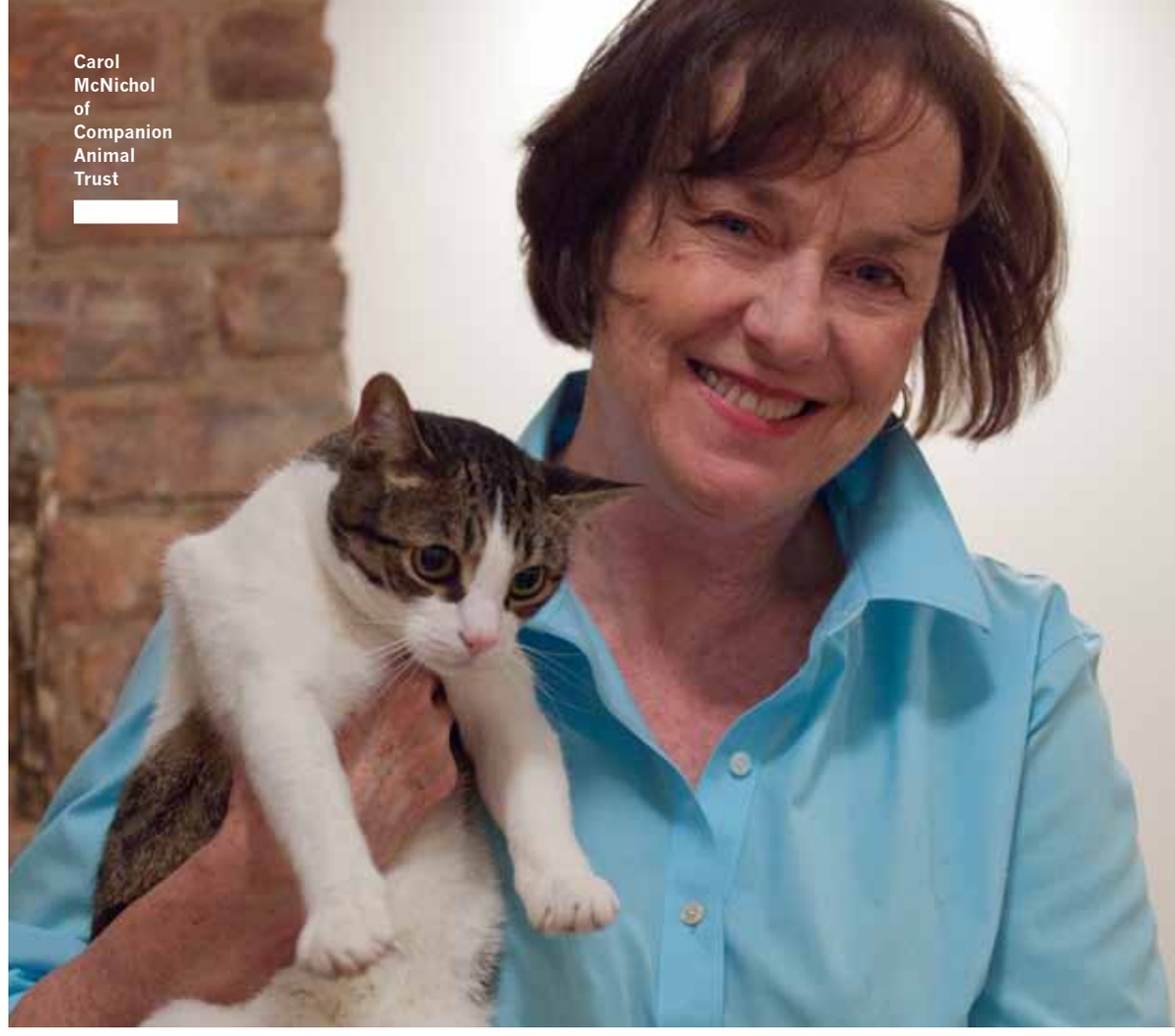
One shelter I didn't immediately contact was the one closest to us: Liberty Humane Society. My knee-jerk reaction: There is no way I am sending these cats to a traditional shelter (read: to face certain death). In my mind, these cats would go to a no-kill shelter or I would keep them on my own, outdoors – a prospect that made me queasy because it was getting cold out.

Unfortunately, many no-kill shelters are limited by their housing capacity; they're not bound by law to take in all animals the way a state-licensed municipal animal shelter is. The number they take in is typically determined by the number of staff members – usually volunteers – available to foster animals in their homes. This means that no-kill shelters can become selective about who they admit, and people seeking a haven for an animal risk getting a "no room at the inn" response, no response at all or worse – admittance to a shelter where severe overcrowding results in even more suffering.

A little over a week after my email, I heard back from Joan Mackiewicz of the Hudson County Animal League (HCAL), who wrote, "Since you're in Jersey City, you should contact the Liberty Humane Society." (HCAL did not respond to interview requests for this story.)

Liberty Humane Society (LHS) is Jersey City's municipal animal shelter. Find a stray animal? Call Jersey City's Division of Animal Control; they'll pick it up and it will likely end up at LHS, where it will be treated for immediate illness and injuries, tested for terminal disease and put in the pipeline toward adoption. That doesn't mean the animal will be adopted: Sometimes animals are too sick or too feral for the shelter to handle.

There are as many as 50 million cats in the U.S., according to estimates from Julie Levy, professor of veterinary medicine and a specialist in feral cat population control at the University of Florida. By Levy's formula – human population divided by six – that means there could be up to 40,000 cats living in Jersey City, both in homes and on the street. With numbers like that and an internet clogged with LOLcats, you can ignore the Man's Best Friend propaganda: We are a nation of the kittaaaay.



Carol McNichol of Companion Animal Trust

Yet it's our very fascination with the cat that has led to many of its problems – mainly, our idea that they are independent creatures left well enough alone. In a recent Harris poll conducted for the nonprofit Alley Cat Allies, when given the choice between leaving a stray cat where you found it and having the cat put down, 81 percent of respondents said they would let the animal be. The assumptions being, presumably, that cats can take care of themselves and that the shelter is where all cats go to die.

Part of that is born of American shelters' ugly history: According to Nancy Peterson, cat programs manager for the Humane Society of the United States, 15 million dogs and cats were put down each year in the 1970s, on average. Today it's down to about 4 million, "and most of those certainly are cats," Peterson says.

One reason for the decline is the push to spay and neuter pets. But another, Peterson says, is a little thing called TNR, or trap-neuter-return.

In this model, a volunteer caregiver (usually the owner of the property where the cats are

found or a friendly neighbor) traps feral cats; has them sterilized and vaccinated at a vet's office, usually with help from a nonprofit that subsidizes the cost; and then returns them to their habitat with the promise to provide regular food, shelter from the elements and vet care as needed. Ferals are cats that live outdoors, were probably born outdoors and are not socialized. Considered unadoptable, they're the ones that, if brought to any shelter, almost invariably perish. In the past five years, Peterson says, the number of known TNR programs in the U.S. and Canada has doubled, from 700 to 1,400. And where those TNR programs exist, shelters euthanize fewer cats.

"TNR is a great option, and it's a fabulous program because, honestly, there aren't enough homes for all these cats," says Irene Borngraeber, Liberty Humane's director of development. "Though I do have to say, tame animals that are out in the streets, they shouldn't stay [outside]... but for feral cats, for whom the street is their territory and who have a designated caretaker, that is a really great option, to let them be, to let them live."

LHS doesn't have its own TNR service due to budget limitations, but it does provide referrals and advice to residents, and "it's something we would like to develop," Borngraeber says.

While the old shelter stereotype is often still deserved – in 2009, 82 percent of cats taken to shelters statewide were euthanized, and 4 million nationwide is still a lot of blood on the hands of shelter workers, the reluctant accomplices – the picture in Hudson County, where TNR programs are in place, is considerably less bleak.

That same year, Secaucus Animal Shelter and Liberty Humane put down 23 percent of the 2,112 felines that came into their care. That's still a fourth of the cat intake. But perhaps a more telling figure is 42 percent, or 896 – that's the number of cats at those two shelters that were not reunited with owners, adopted or killed. In other words, they're still being cared for in the shelters or at authorized foster homes. All of those are from Liberty Humane.

As for the overcrowded, disease-ridden cages, not so much at LHS. On two recent visits (one surprise, one short notice), there was little evidence of either. Much of the shelter's cramped quarters is taken up by three rooms of cats: a 24-cage intake area, a 72-cage isolation room for sick and injured animals, and Borngraeber's pride and joy, an 80-cage cattery.

Each space was roomy enough for staff to walk around in, looked and smelled clean, and held no more than one feline per cage – the exception being in the cattery, where a handful were out and about and several cages held sibling kittens, for a total of 100 adoptable pets. The litter boxes were clean, the water was fresh and common shelter ailments like eye and upper respiratory infections were rare (as in, I saw one cat with a cold). What's more, many of them had been there long past the mandatory seven-day holding period. We're talking an average of 45 to 60 days, but many are here for months, even a year or more.

"We do not make choices based on space," Borngraeber says. "Any decision [to euthanize an animal] is based on the ability of the animal to recover based on medical treatment. If something isn't working, and it's gone through a course of antibiotics and we don't know what's going on, then the cat's probably not going to be adoptable. We make every attempt to not be motivated by space."

What about when sick cats get better? "We do an adoption promotion, and they stay in isolation until we're ready to move them up."

What about when a feral cat comes in?

"For feral cats," she says, "TNR is the best thing to do."

At Animal Control, demand for cat help is similarly reduced thanks to the caregiving and educational efforts of organizations like the Neighborhood Feral Cat Initiative. In 2011 the department received 910 cat-related calls, only nine of them about feral colonies (more than a third were about dead cats, though, and another 305 were strays).

Coincidentally, Jersey City is the center of a growing TNR community, with organizations such as the Neighborhood Feral Cat Initiative and HCAL's TNR services sprouting up over the past few years. The Feral Cat Initiative started in 2009 to train people to care for their own TNR colonies, and HCAL recently began working on a TNR program with the city of Bayonne. The Division of Animal Control is all for it.

"Cats, like other wildlife, have the right to exist, and we respond only when cats are creating a health or other type of nuisance," city spokeswoman Jennifer Morrill says in an email. Hardly a signal that potentially tens of thousands of cats are running amok. So why give them a second thought?

Because the more cats there are, the more cats will end up in shelters. Duh. But, says HSUS's Peterson, "it's true, you can't trap cats you can't see."

Therein lies the rub: Just how feral is a cat that's been sterilized and whose environment is engineered by people to an extent that cats grow dependent on caregivers for regular food and cozy shelter?

Cats are smart (probably why we like them so much); given the option of scarfing food from a dish that shows up at the same time every day and digging through trash cans, most will go for the dish. More significant, they go for the person offering it, a skill they likely picked up when, as many believe, they started living in humans' midst in ancient Egypt.

"The [cat] efficiently protected the valuable fruits of the harvest, while charming one and all with their beauty, grace, cleanliness, independence and aura of mystery. These twin aspects of gentle companionship and fierce protectiveness appealed to the Egyptians' religious and artistic sensibilities," writes Wendy Christensen in her 2004 book *Outwitting Cats*.

Spaying and neutering just intensifies the bond.

"Intact cats are, in many ways, more like adult wildcats than neotenized domestic cats," Christensen writes.

Neotenized cats are those that display permanent kitten traits due to genetic heritage, socialization with people, and removing sex hormones. Remove the biological imperative and add reliable food and shelter, and you get a recipe for easing myriad human burdens: you save property owners cat fights over mates and territory, spraying and trash-can tipping, and you save animal shelters from having to care for and often euthanize a surfeit of animals. Everybody's happy.

But to riff on Peterson's observation, you can't trap cats that don't want to be trapped. And the ones that don't, you don't. Feral cats keep breeding and living in our shadows, and taking on a TNR colony means adopting your very own outdoor brood, with all the responsibilities of domestic-cat ownership and then some.

Enter Carol McNichol.

On a search for a solution to my own cat dilemma, all roads seemed to point to her. If I want to go the trap-neuter-return route, HCAL advised

me, talk to Carol McNichol. If I want help with stray cats, my church friends encouraged me, talk to Carol McNichol. If I want to see the kitties live, the Animal Control dispatcher warned me, talk to Carol McNichol.

So I called Carol McNichol.

As founder of the nonprofit Companion Animal Trust and its companion TNR program, the Neighborhood Feral Cat Initiative, McNichol devotes a large portion of her time to fostering adoptable cats and kittens and training others to manage TNR colonies.

"I get phone calls all the time, people saying, 'I can't keep my cat or cats, I can't bring them to the shelter, I don't want them killed,'" she says.

Truth be told, McNichol is more of a dog person. She's actually allergic to cats.

"I bought a dog in 1987," she says. "It was an impulse, a little Shih Tzu, in a pet store. And I didn't know anything about animal welfare issues, like most people don't. Now I know that dog came from a puppy mill, no doubt. So I just loved this dog, and as time went on, this animal magnetism came out," she says, laughing. "I was just drawn to them."

The native New Yorker became involved in the animal welfare issues in the mid-'90s, after she moved to Jersey City and became involved with Liberty Humane Society. When the shelter opened in 2002, she became a volunteer.

"That took me to a whole new level of learning about the companion animal world, and the enormity of the homelessness of these animals," she says. "And back then I just wanted to save every one of them."

She founded CAT in 2005 to create a dialogue about cats and provide practical ways to address the problem. The feral cat initiative was announced in February 2009 after McNichol received a private grant to provide training and subsidized veterinary services.

"I've never been a cat person, really," she says. But her work at the shelter convinced her that if she wanted to make a dent in the well-being of animals, it would be in the feline world. "Seventy percent of cats that enter shelters in this country are killed. So that's not very good odds for cats to survive. The way I perceive it is, dogs are much more of a threat to humans, so municipalities really do enforce those laws. ... Cats? They're ignored. The cities just don't do anything because they're not as much of a threat."

"They're the cats other people threw out. They keep the mice away, so I feed them."

No harm, no foul. Until the collective myth of the independent cat leads to owners not sterilizing their pets and then letting them roam outside, and then finding themselves presenting a litter of kittens at the shelter or leaving them to fend for themselves, or colonies of cats having two or three litters of kittens each year. Which is where we find ourselves, with overcrowded shelters and free-roaming cats in the millions.

"Now it's up to us in the community to educate ourselves and to educate the cities," McNichol says. "And they're getting smarter – right now we're talking to Bayonne to address the reproduction of free-roaming cats."

Now in its third year, the Neighborhood Feral Cat Initiative has trained nearly 275 people in Hudson County, most of them in Jersey City, and has sterilized 1,200 cats, including 80 of an estimated 225 in Country Village as part of a TNR collaboration between Neighborhood Feral and HCAL sponsored by PetSmart Charities.

"Once feral cats are fixed, nuisance behaviors subside, like the fighting, the male spraying, obviously kittens," McNichol says. "The first question I ask [caregivers] is, 'Have you seen any kittens?' I mean, that's the whole goal."

In Country Village so far, 10 kittens and three friendly adults have been pulled out of the TNR process at "N" and placed for adoption.

"It's the right thing to do," says McNichol. "But in some cases, if I'm teaching people, if they don't have the wherewithal to find a home for a cat, and the cat is basically safe, and it's fixed now and you're feeding it, and it's a friendly cat, it's OK to put it back out in the colony. If it's safe and so on. But I can't do that because I have some resources and I just know better. I like to see friendlies come off the streets. That's my heart. They're susceptible to dangers – because they're friendly. They don't run away."

As head of a nonprofit rescue, McNichol fosters cats and kittens at her home. On the day of our visit, there are about 12 cats and kittens living in roomy pens, mostly one per cage, spanning two rooms. There is mewing all around, and most of the cats seem healthy and happy.

One by one, she introduces each of her charges, including a trio of tiny orange tabbies – possibly the cutest cats ever – and opening the back door to the colony she tends outside. "Hi guys!" They look as healthy and happy as the gang inside, and McNichol lights up when she shows them off.

All told, better than a shelter?

"The best thing for feral cats is for them not to be [in shelters] at all," Peterson says.

Wrong answer, according to Daphna Nachminovitch, vice president of cruelty investigations for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which, somewhat ironically, does not oppose euthanasia.

"TNR is nothing short of abandonment," she said in a phone call recently, pointing to the dangers cats face outdoors, such as vehicles, wildlife and extreme weather. In her time as an intake worker in a Chicago shelter, she said, "of the hundreds of cats I saw, the vast majority had severe injuries, frostbite or ear mite infestation so severe that they'd scratched off layers of skin. These are not wildlife; they are domesticated animals that depend on people for food."

"That may be true," says Borngraeber of LHS, "but I've never seen a cat in survival mode go back to not being in survival mode."

The bottom line for everyone in the animal welfare scene, PETA included, is solving the overpopulation problem at its root.

"I think we can all agree that the cats shouldn't be out there in the first place," Nachminovitch says. "It's really easy not to contribute [to the problem]. Adopt from a shelter. Spay and neuter your pets. Don't get an animal until you're sure you're prepared to make that commitment. If people are willing to do these three things, they will be the difference between life and death."

And, McNichol would add, take a TNR course.

After thousands of years, our relationship with cats isn't going anywhere, whether we take them to a shelter or a rescue, leave them to fend for themselves in the streets, take on the costly burden of full-on TNR caregiving, or somewhere in between. One recent afternoon I crossed the path of no fewer than six cats on the sidewalk, gathering for food a woman was putting out.

"They're the cats other people threw out," she said. "They keep the mice away, so I feed them."

As for the cats outside my building, two of them are in my office recovering from neuter and abortion/spay surgeries. One is curled up on a chair, purring and napping; the other is on my lap, also purring and napping, and intermittently waking up to lick my knee. I told an intake worker at LHS that I may bring them in, but I haven't yet. The third, the dark, mysterious one, never showed up the first night we put the traps out and no one has seen her since. ■