

CATmatters_{update}

Every Cat Matters. Every Person Counts. Spring 2004

Feral and Stray Cat Stories

by Natalya Sapko

As one can imagine, there are hundreds and hundreds of stories that can be told about the cats and people that GNHCP has encountered over the years of its existence. In 2002 alone, 325 feral or stray cats were helped by the Cat Project, and that number climbed to over 400 in 2003. Each one of these stories, as with each cat and person, is unique, special, and each and every one, no matter how small or insignificant seeming, matters greatly. Not every story can be shared; however just a few can clearly illustrate the enormity of the Cat Project's task, its ability to change lives, and how in fact each and every cat and person counts.

Assistance calls are fielded every week at the Center, and as often as the situations are heartbreaking, they are also heartwarming. One such assistance call came in the spring of 2003, when Beverly and Roger Keener of Northford looked for help with a situation in their own backyard. Mr. Keener was generous enough to spend some time with me recently in order to relate a story of both harsh reality and great gentleness.

Mr. and Mrs. Keener had been aware of the presence of stray cats in their neighborhood for years, but it wasn't until a little female they call "Dot" set up residence in their shed with her kittens that they looked for some help with the situation. They found someone to take some of the kittens, but their real concern was with Dot and her futures litters. They wanted a more permanent fix to their situation, so Beverly searched the internet and found the GNHCP. Within a short period of time, nine kitties were trapped in their backyard, some of whom were returned, including "Chin" who lives there to this day, and others adopted out. Unfortunately, the elusive Dot was not one of these, and she continues to evade efforts to trap her. Quite sadly, Roger and Beverly found the remains of two of her last summer's litter in their yard, victims of a local predator. Another of their favorites, "White Foot" was lost to a car as he was crossing the road. These are the realities of feral cat

life, and some of the many sufferings that the Cat Project looks to alleviate. But this story also has an especially bright center, an unexpected and somewhat miraculous being known as Bandit.

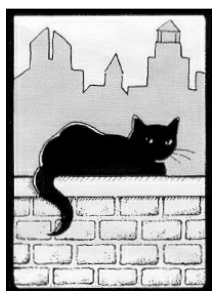
Because of the bitter cold this past winter, GNHCP

President Cheryl DeFilippo encouraged Roger and Beverly to keep the latest young feral trapped in their yard in the house to pass this bitter time safely and securely. The Keeners purchased a cage, which they set up in their kitchen, and the plan was to release the youngster in the spring because he seemed to already be quite feral in his demeanor. But plans don't always go as they are supposed to. Before long, Roger was letting Bandit out into the kitchen for romps. Bandit, true

to his tricky name, managed to make good use of his free time and seemed to enjoy "morphing" his way into tight spots, such as under the sideboard and into a drawer, which he somehow managed from the back of a cupboard through a tiny opening. Finally, Bandit discovered the Keener's basement, where he and Roger enjoy nightly games of tennis ball chasing, and leaping after bits of paper on a string. Roger reports that he has even received some fond "headbutts", and that Bandit thoroughly enjoys a good brushing. It appears that the Keener household has a new permanent resident, and as Beverly says, Bandit truly is "the feral who came in from the cold".

The scale of projects undertaken by the Cat Project vary greatly from a few ferals to many, and one of the biggest occurred during the summer and early fall of 2000 on Wooster Street in New Haven. Jane Scarpellino, GNHCP volunteer and all-around cat angel, gave me the details of this event recently. Jane has always been involved in cat rescue work, and is a lifelong resident of Wooster Street. She has been aware of and involved with the situation there for many years. She talks about a

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The mission of the Greater New Haven Cat Project, Inc. is to alleviate the unnecessary suffering of abandoned, neglected and abused cats through spaying and neutering and public education. We are a 501(c)(3) organization, comprised solely of volunteers.

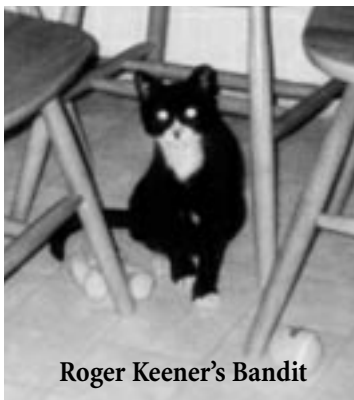
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Roger Keener's Bandit

number of local residents, including her aunt Barbara Grazioso and friend Bridget Duquette, who cared for the many cats living in that area. But by the summer of 2000, the situation was getting more and more difficult to control, and other residents, less concerned with the welfare of the animals, decided to use their political clout to do something about it. And that something wasn't good.

A letter was sent to the City of New Haven threatening law suits if the "cat problem", including "unsanitary conditions" and "health issues" wasn't solved. The City's solution was to trap and eliminate the cats. The action started over the hot 4th of July weekend, with cats left in traps for days with no response from the city. The animal supporters in the neighborhood took immediate action, calling the city, contacting alderpersons, attending meetings. The neighborhood responded strongly, and the city ceased and desisted. What followed was an enormous amount of education and communication, and one of the best examples of how a municipality and a private rescue organization can work together to solve a problem.

Jane was already involved with GNHCP, and she worked fervently to get the city to cooperate with a plan for a massive TNR action. And it worked. Fully funded by the city, volunteers descended upon Wooster Street in July and trapped over twenty cats in one day. The TEAM van moved in and set up shop, including a recovery area in an on-site building, the owner of which had given permission for its use. Cat Project volunteers came back again toward the end of that summer and repeated their efforts, trapping another thirty cats. These cats were housed at the City Animal Shelter the night before their surgeries and for recovery until ready for return to the colony or placement in foster homes. All told, with the cooperation between the City of New Haven and GNHCP, over 50 cats were trapped, neutered, and returned to Wooster Street over the span of a few months, according to Jane. Her role in the maintenance of this colony is complicated by her relationship

with her neighbors, some of whom she has known all her life. Jane sees herself as an animal advocate, and can only try to appeal to the best, most humane side of human nature. She tries to explain to other residents that the problem is caused by irresponsible pet ownership. Some people are ready to hear this message, and have quickly converted to the cause. Others, sadly, are



Petey enjoys his new life in the country. He says the food is better here.

not. Jane reports that some of her neighbors still won't speak to her and wonder "what has gotten into you with these cats?" But the action worked. Jane maintains the colony (approximately 30 cats), including the beautiful Lily and periodically, the Cat Project does small TNR's to keep things under control. To date, GNHCP has neutered 160 cats who have been returned to the colony or placed in permanent homes. An enormous problem? Yes, but this cat story shows how hard work and speaking up can solve a problem with a humane and just solution.

Although TNR's can be very successful, as illustrated above, not every feral cat can be returned from whence it came, however. Some neighborhoods simply offer too many threats, and sometimes no viable feeders are available. This is where GNHCP's Barn Project comes into the picture. Cyndi Steinmetz, a Greenwich resident, currently houses two GNHCP kitties, Inky and Petey. Petey comes from an unsafe neighborhood in New Haven, where cat lives can be short and harsh. Inky, formerly of East Haven, was left without a feeder and had to be moved somewhere safe. In 2002, around the same time these two appeared to be running out of luck,

Cyndi found the Cat Project website. She had been looking for some cats to keep her "mouse problem" under control. It seems that mice are awfully fond of horse grain, and Cyndi wasn't particularly interested in sharing. So off went Petey and Inky to their new country home. Cyndi's commitment was complete, and she spent weeks acclimating the two to their new surroundings. After a week or so in their cages, Petey seemed ready to get out. He quickly "took over the barn" and made it into his kingdom. Not appearing to be a true feral, Petey enjoys socializing with the resident humans, and is quite comfortable with his new horse friends as he visits them in their stalls or runs along the fence to say Hello to them. He also likes to leave Cyndi the occasional "present". Needless to say, the horse grain now goes untouched. Inky's transition took somewhat longer. For months after her release, "Inky spottings" were regularly reported around Cyndi's property and at her neighbors. But the shy, black cat seems to finally regard her home as a safe place where she can allow herself to be seen by human eyes on a more regular basis. Most importantly, she truly is safe, and no longer has to worry about meals and shelter. Cats such as Petey and Inky are lucky that people like Cyndi are willing to work with the Cat Project to offer them a home for life.

These are just a few cat stories, but they touch on all aspects of GNHCP's work: the sweat, the commitment, the sadness and joy. They must be told if just to remind us all that the hard work, the irritations and the struggles are all worth it. Every bit of it.

Lily thanks Jane Scarpellino for another sumptuous meal



Volunteer Spotlight

by Natalya Sapko

For those of you have been with or followed GNHCP since its inception, you know that things have dramatically changed in the past several years since the Cat Project's website hit the internet. Prior to that time, word of mouth, flyers, tables at Petco, and other grass roots level labor was the only way to spread the word of the Cat Project's work, raise funds, and, most importantly, adopt out cats in need. But the move into cyberspace has increased exposure of GNHCP to the public in general, and more specifically, to other people who can offer help. The person largely responsible for maintaining this important source of information is this month's Volunteer in the Spotlight, **Pete Johnson**.

When one talks to Pete about the work he and his wife **Jeanette Murdock** have done for the Cat Project, one is struck most of all by his modesty and gentle demeanor. Pete seems to embody all of the human qualities most necessary for volunteer work: compassion, dedication, and the willingness to open his home to yet another kitty in need. For those of you who have worked down at the Center, Pete is the proud father of **Nina** (Formerly a member of the feral cat colony maintained by the Keener's. See proceeding article), of whom all of us were quite fond, and who came to live with Pete, as his fourth (but not last!) cat, in November of last year. But how did it all begin, this interesting mix of technological skill and touchie feeliness? It goes back quite a way.

First, the interest in animals. "I always had animals when growing up", says Pete. But the real cat passion started in 1999, when Pete was laid up following surgery. That was when he and Jeanette acquired their first ocicat, Tache, who kept Pete company while he convalesced. Their bond grew quickly, and this led to another ocicat in the house, the beautiful and elegant Noirette. For a while, Pete and Jeanette were content with their brood of two, but that was to end tragically in December of 2002, when Noirette, weakened from a kidney infection, was put to sleep while held in Pete's arms. To hear the emotion in Pete's voice when he speaks of this loss is to understand the depths of his love for animals. It was the confluence of this event with another that led to Pete's involvement with GNHCP. In West Haven, Jeanette's mother had become involved with a group of feral cats living near and around her residence. Jeanette's phone calls brought her a referral to the Cat Project, and before long, Pete was helping in the TNR at his mother-in-law's resi-

dence during the winter of 2003. The results of this effort led to two more kitties at the Murdock-Johnson house, Abby and Tachette. Why did Pete get involved? "It needed to be done in memory of Noirette", he says. A simple statement on the surface, but one with great depth and conviction.

And as anyone who gets involved with the Cat Project knows, it never ends with one good deed. "I've done some transport and TNR's", says Pete. Also, he's performed numerous repairs on



Pete and Tache work on the GNHCP website

the shed at the Center, and built a donation box to be used at Petco. And then there's the website.

Pete's interest in technology and computers goes back almost as far as his love of animals. It was in the late 70's, in Toronto, when working as a factory manager that he presciently saw that the

future was in computers. He took it upon himself to learn the new computer system his company had installed. When he came back to the states in the 80's, he offered his services to small businesses as a consultant, work from which he retired just last year. His knowledge of computers, software, and website construction is staggering, and obviously a passion. And as we all well know, GNHCP President Cheryl DeFilippo knows how to make use of knowledge and passion. With Michele Lacey's departure last year, Cheryl was left without someone to manage the website. Until she met Pete. It wasn't long before he took over.

"I spent time with Michele looking over the website before she left" Pete states. And since last year, he's been in charge, finding a new host server that could accommodate large Adobe formats and clear images. He moved everything from the old site to the new one, and although he says he is "constantly learning" when it comes to computers, he feels he is "now proficient in HTML". And aren't we lucky for that.

Oh, and the kitties at the Murdock-Johnson house? Well Nina moved in this past fall, and Fluffy another rescue from that West Haven TNR settled down in February of this past year to bring the grand total to five. Maybe some day they'll all have a website of their own, too.

Be Kind to Animals Poster Contest

GNHCP sponsored a poster contest for New Haven students Grades 1 through 4. The purpose of the contest was to make children aware of the need to respect all animals and to care for their pet as a family member. It was also a means for children to express ideas on how to educate others about responsible pet ownership and treating animals with kindness and respect. It is our hope that through the education of children today, the number of abandoned and abused animals will decrease in the future. It is important to learn about responsible pet ownership and respect at a young age. Many children go through a period of "innocent" cruelty in which they injure or kill small animals in the process of testing their boundaries. With adult guidance, most children learn

to empathize with animals and understand that animals have the capacity to feel pain. Children must understand that the pet deserves care, requiring food, and water, regular visits to the veterinarian, shelter, protection, love and attention and that any act of cruelty is unacceptable. Children must further understand the importance of humane values.

And the winners are:

Antonia

First Prize, 2nd Grade - Conte/West Hill School

Shai Jaffe

First Prize, 3rd Grade - Conte/West Hill School

Lyn Tina Cook

First Prize, 4th Grade - East Rock School

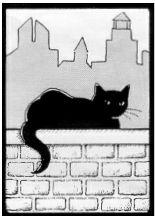
"The ideal of calm exists in a sitting cat."

Jules Reynard



The GNHCP celebrates
St. Patrick's Day in the New Haven
parade with our very own giant
Cat Mobile!

Float Committee: *(left to right)*
Roberta Reynolds, Shawna Bartkus,
Chris Tomczyk and Cheryl Guliuzza



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