

Cats Gone Wild

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
October 2015

Overpopulation brings a call to action in Miami-Dade



In recent years, cat overpopulation has become an issue of concern for community leaders and animal advocates. Along the Biscayne Corridor, colonies of stray and feral cats have grown out of control, causing a range of citizen complaints from foul odor to worry over the well-being of these animals.

One advocacy group in particular has made a world of difference in local feral/stray/pet cat populations. Founded in 1995, The Cat Network (www.thecatnetwork.org) has worked toward humane reduction of feline overpopulation through a four-point process: providing low-cost spay/neuter services; educating the public about the importance of sterilization; offering adoption-referral programs to help members find forever homes for their foster cats; advocating for a policy that treats animals humanely and controls their numbers through non-lethal means.

Located in Miami, this nonprofit serves South Florida, from the Keys to Palm Beach, and is a volunteer advocacy organization rather than a rescue group. They help the foster parents of rescued cats; they don't find, shelter, or foster out cats themselves.

Its five founding members are women with other occupations. Jill Steinberg, secretary of the board of directors of The Cat Network, owns and operates a successful electrical contracting firm.

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Steinberg explains how it works: “Our foster parents are members of The Cat Network, and foster their own cats. We’re an adoption-referral agency. We show people how to foster -- those cats have to be sterilized, they have to be tested for feline AIDS and feline leukemia. They need to have shots.”

Once people become part of the Network’s adoption program, they can show their foster cats on weekends at one of five PetSmart and four Petco locations. (The Cat Network has partnered for more than 15 years with both businesses.)

“We put them on our website and on Pet Finder,” says Steinberg, “and we usually adopt somewhere between 60 and 85 cats a month.”

Networking is important to the organization, which has half a million Facebook “likes” and is a member of Miami ASPCA Community Partnership. Composed of the ASPCA, Miami-Dade Animal Services, and the Humane Society of Greater Miami, along with smaller groups, the ASPCA Community Partnership has worked since 2011 to increase the live release rate of animals from the county’s shelter.

“So far, it’s gone from 37 percent when we started to almost 90 percent,” says Steinberg.

Asked for the group’s top concerns, Steinberg is clear: “Population control, population control, population control. First, you have to understand that there are somewhere between 400,000 and 500,000 free-roaming cats in Miami-Dade. That doesn’t count pets. In order to solve that problem, at which we’ve done pretty well, we need to further our efforts in educating the public that if you feed a cat -- you sterilize the cat.”

Cats can have kittens every two months, she explains. “They can get pregnant as early as two months old, and each litter is usually between four to seven kittens.” So the numbers quickly skyrocket.

As a major advocate of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) of stray and feral cats, The Cat Network offers \$30 certificates to members (membership costs \$35) that can be used to neuter one male

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community cat in its Meow Mobile. Certificates are accepted by participating vets, too, where The Cat Network pays the difference. Some 4000 to 6000 cats a year are sterilized through its programs.

They also have a municipal alliance with Miami Beach, which received a PetSmart grant to deal with its cat population. The Cat Network has sterilized nearly 3000 cats there since 2010 and is currently doing surgeries on another 2000.

“The Cat Network has facilitated the adoption of 12,000 cats and kittens,” says Steinberg, “and over 100,000 cats have been neutered with our help. Besides these numbers, we’re most proud of educating the public that sterilizing community cats is a priority.

“This wasn’t the case years ago,” she adds. “We’ve been able to instill in the public that in order to control the population, you have to be part of the solution.”

Still, there are thousands more animals out there, and for overwhelmed volunteers, this is stressful.

“This happens with any rescue organization or anybody doing animal welfare,” says Steinberg. “It’s exhausting physically and emotionally. Sometimes the worst thing is to get personally involved in every single phone call. You have to be able to detach yourself and remember you can only help so much, and try to enable people to help themselves. Some volunteers think they can save the world, and you can’t save the world. You can only save a little part of the world.”

The Cat Network celebrates its 20th anniversary with a fundraising gala at UM on October 17, with special guest Jackson Galaxy from Animal Planet.

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