

Cats impacted by Katrina find temporary home at local prison

By Donna C. Gregory



Elli Morris/Chesterfield Observer
Tuesday Kilgore is one of the inmates at the Pocahontas Correctional Unit who is taking care of more than 30 cats impacted by Hurricane Katrina.

When Hurricane Katrina decimated the fragile coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi, humans weren't her only casualties. Thousands of pets were left abandoned when their owners evacuated.

In the weeks following Katrina's wrath, rescuers boarded boats to save stranded animals from stagnant waters. Area animal shelters struggled to find housing for the hundreds of dogs and cats that flooded in.

As cages became crowded, shelters like the Gulf Coast SPCA in Gautier, Mississippi, turned outside the region for help. They found it in an unlikely place: behind the security gates of Chesterfield's Pocahontas Correctional Unit.

Last month, 24 cats were transported to Pocahontas from the Gulf Coast SPCA. Through Save Our Shelter's Pen Pals program, a select group of the prison's inmates will care for them until they find a new forever home.

Making a difference

Six days a week for six hours a day, 35-year old Tuesday Kilgore scoots from cage to cage at the Pen Pals Cat Shelter, spending time with each new feline arrival. "It's very therapeutic for me," shared Kilgore. "It gives me a feeling like I'm actually doing something. I feel like I'm doing something that's worthwhile."

As Kilgore heard news reports of the suffering following Katrina, she felt helpless. "I cried," she recalled. "If I had been able, I would've gone down there to volunteer."

As an inmate that just wasn't possible.

But Kilgore's work detail at the Pen Pals' shelter has given her an unexpected opportunity to help Katrina's smallest, oftentimes forgotten victims – the animals.

Her work is not glamorous – it involves cleaning cages, scooping litter boxes and when that's done, holding, stroking and soothing the kitties, which are still getting used to their new environment – but it's a way to make a difference.

"Even though I'm incarcerated, now I'm able to help in some way," said Kilgore.

Prior to the arrival of the Katrina felines, the Pen Pals shelter housed about a dozen cats that had been rescued from local animal shelters. Now, nearly 40 cats call Pocahontas their temporary home.

In addition to providing basic care for the cats, Kilgore and other inmates spend time socializing the animals to improve their chances of adoption.

This socialization not only helps the cats, but the inmates as well.

"This gives us a chance to love, to take care of something," explained 45-year old Wendy Brickey, another inmate who works at the shelter. "It gives us a sense of responsibility."

It also helps fill the void of being separated from her children. "We don't get to nurture and mother," said Brickey, "so this gives us a chance to do that."

Bonded by bars

The bond between Brickey and her favorite feline Scarlet goes well beyond a few behind-the-ear scratches and head butts. They both know what it's like to live behind bars, and they're both looking forward to a future that doesn't involve a cage or prison cell.

But for now, Brickey and Scarlet are learning important lessons of hope and unconditional love from one another, which may ultimately help them survive in the outside world.

Scarlet was feral when she came to the shelter and was terrified of humans, but over time, she's come to accept, and at times, even appreciate, Brickey's touch. Through Brickey, Scarlet has learned how to love and trust. In turn, Scarlet has shown Brickey the value of patience and that slow, steady determination can lead to success.

"People tell you there isn't hope," said Brickey, "but with a little hard work, that breakthrough can come. Now I can pick her up, pet her, let her lay in my lap. To love on her like she lets me love on her...it's amazing."

Unconditional love

Save Our Shelters, a local animal advocacy and rescue group, began its Pen Pals program in 2001 when it began placing hard-to-adopt dogs with inmates at the James River Correctional Center. The inmates teach the dogs basic obedience and work on behavioral problems, so they can find a new home more easily.

Earlier this summer, Save Our Shelters reestablished its feline program at Pocahontas.

"It's an ideal thing for the inmates, because they receive so much unconditional love," explained Peggy Lynch, Save Our Shelter's feline rescue coordinator. "No one is asking why [they're] in prison and how long [they're] going to be there. Ideally, I'd like to see this expanded. This is the only prison in the Virginia system that has a cat program."

Bob Worthy, Pocahontas' senior fiscal technician, said the Pen Pals program is beneficial for both the cats and the inmates.

"[Most of these cats] would've been killed, run over or euthanized in a shelter," he explained. "[For the inmates,] it builds up self-esteem, self-confidence. Animals are safe. There's no judgment there. As long as you feed an animal, keep their cage clean, and give them attention, they will love you back."

Worthy is hoping the inmates will "move the values they've learned here to the outside world once they're released," he said.

Prior inmates from the shelter have gone on to work at other animal shelters upon their release from prison.

New homes wanted

This month, Save Our Shelters will host adoption stands at the PetSmart on Midlothian Turnpike each Sunday from 10AM-2PM to find new homes for the cats impacted by Katrina. The cats were living at the Gulf Coast SPCA when the hurricane hit, so there's no chance they will be reunited with prior owners.

"We're also more than happy during the week to arrange a visit and see if we have a love match," said Lynch. "All of the cats are on our website, and we can arrange for a one-on-one if someone is interested."

For more information about adoption, visit www.sos-penpals.com or contact Lynch by calling 358-7499 or emailing peggy@saveourshelters.com.