

### Strays – The Cats of the Street

For as long as I could remember, there had always been at least ten stray cats living on every street I passed. With each sighting I would beg and plead with my mother to let me take one home, to be able to love and nurture one of the poor malnourished creatures. Eventually, it came to the point where I would carry several cans of cat food in my backpack with me to school, so that I could leave them behind the dumpster for the mass of strays that stayed sheltered under it. After a while, my mother even began to leave food for them, keeping a bag of hard food in the back of her truck. Yet when I left my little elementary school where the majority of the cats resided, I worried for them, since their number seemed to grow each spring. I realized then that a few cans and a bag of food would not be enough, and it certainly would not fix the growing problem of a large group of reproducing strays. It was then that I was able to enlist the help of Mr. Bob, a kind elderly gentleman who would also bring food to the cats. We talked and made plans for days, until finally, we had the solution. Thus began our efforts to stop the number of strays in the area from multiplying, with several vet visits, a few traps, and a lot of mini bottles.

The first objective on our list was to slow, if not completely stop, the cats reproducing. By using coercion (and several cans and bags of cat food) we were able to befriend some of the stray cats. With their trust, we would then get them into cat carriers and take them to the animal veterinarian clinic down the road. There, we would have the cats spayed or neutered, checked for any serious diseases such as Feline AIDS, and Feline Leukemia,

given rabies shots and a yearly vaccine, then given a good once over for ticks and sores. After hearing what we planned to do, the lead Vet agreed to do all of the operations and checkups, the blood work and tests...for free. Yes, for free. We were ecstatic. This part of our plan had been the biggest problem, since getting medical assistance for so many animals would have literally cost us a fortune. Yet there was still one small problem, not all of the cats were warming up to us as the others were.

These strays remained extremely feral and too dangerous to try and corner. So, we used humane animal traps to catch the elusive felines. The traps would be baited with cans of wet cat food and placed in areas where the cats frequented. Sometimes camouflage like a green or brown towel was required to cover the cage in order to better trick the cats. School administrators even agreed to place traps on the campus to help catch the cats that were living under the portables and around the buildings. They would then receive the same treatment as the others (under an anesthetic of course). However, this works for only a short amount of time. Eventually, the cats grew smart of our little scheme, and began to either avoid the traps completely, or work their way in and out of them without setting off the weight sensitive trigger plate. This prolonged the time it would take to have the animals fixed, and thus, led to our next objective, finding the kittens that were being born to these smarter strays.

This process was by far the most exhausting. As the cats continued to multiply, albeit much slower than before, we knew something had to be done to stop these new cats from living as strays and continuing the population of cats in the area. So, we would keep an eye on the few females still able to reproduce, and when it appeared that they had finally

given birth, the hunt would begin. Since the cats we were working so hard for were all located on the streets around my old elementary school, there were several places for the new litter to be hidden. We crawled under portables, into drainage ditches; one mother cat had even grabbed one of her kittens and fled up into a tree that required a large ladder in order to get her down from. But it was not over yet. With the kittens away from their mothers, we had to hand raise them ourselves. And so began several weeks of bottle feeding, litter box training, weaning, vet visits, and adoption meetings. Waking up at night every two hours to bottle feed litters that averaged 3-5 kittens, was something I found very difficult to do while also trying to keep up with school. Thankfully my mother also had begun to take part in our work and was willing to work some nights for me. When the kittens were old enough, they received full vaccination shots, any medication for worms or upper respiratory issues they may have developed, and an appointment to be spayed or neutered when they were old enough to go through the operation. All free as with the stray cats. The vet even had a funny file name for each litter, because he would not name them individually, he would name them for where ever it was we had taken them from. Some were "Dumpster Kitties", others were "Portable Babies", and one group was even the "Drainage Ditch Gang". Unfortunately, in the beginning we found that many of the litters were being born with coccidia, an intestinal parasite that could be kept in check by an adult's immune system. After two or three weeks, despite heavy medication and close observation, we lost 3 kittens to the disease, and each was given a name from a family member and is buried in the yard near the rosebushes.

Today, we have spayed/neutered nearly 70 stray cats, raised 25 kittens, all of which were adopted by loving families, and continue to monitor the area for any new cats or litters that may appear. Before, there were several dozen cats living in a small area, fighting for food and their own survival. Now, twenty cats remain, and all have been spayed or neutered. It took five years to finally get the problem under control, and it will take another ten of close monitoring to prevent it from happening ever again. When people abandon their pets, or allow them to roam about outside with out being spayed or neutered, they create issues like this and help them to escalate to such horrendous proportions. Now, with the communities help, we have begun to expand our efforts across the county, enlisting other schools and rural neighborhoods to trap, spay and neuter, and adopt the cats in their areas. We use this story as an example to show people the consequences of abandoning their pets, and the amount of effort that goes into preventing these animals from suffering any more than they already have. All the animals that were tested for Feline AIDS and Feline Leukemia and found with positive test results were humanely euthanized and cremated. Then, they were buried in the garden located on the elementary school campus.