Wrangling thirty-five cats is probably not how most teens spend their Saturday mornings, but I cannot imagine my life being any different. Every Saturday, I volunteer at the Monroe County SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)- a cat rehabilitation center. Each morning, I help to feed cats, clean their cages, and socialize them for future adoption. I spend the first few hours of each weekend walking around the shelter and greeting each cat, always ending with Binx, a permanent stay who I have grown to be best friends with. He loves to climb on my back and stay with me for the day, so I pick him up before getting to work.

However, Binx can never be adopted. He was a victim of severe animal cruelty when he was a kitten, several bb gunshots to his head resulted in 17 fragments of his skull lodged in his brain. He has lost the use of one of his paws and one of his eyes, and because of the positioning of the fragments, he cannot be operated on. His condition leaves him too vulnerable to sudden death, and thus he will remain at the shelter.

Another one of my favorite charges at the shelter, Tibs, came to the shelter just a few months ago. When he came to the shelter, he was so severely injured that we assumed he wouldn’t live. Both of his hind legs had been skinned to the bone and his ears had been burnt off with hot metal. He had been anonymously called in for pick up, and when my boss found him, it was clear he was a victim of abuse.

Gigi had to have one of her legs amputated because of a gunshot, Jade lost her eye in a hoarding house, and Tater suffered a severe infection after being abandoned.

All of the cats at the SPCA are special needs cases, which could mean anything from an intellectual disability to a chronic illness. However, most cats' needs come from cruelty cases
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like the ones above. Before I began working at the shelter, I knew that animal abuse was a problem, as everyone does. But I wasn’t aware of the severity it affects cats. Oftentimes, when considering animal abuse, people picture livestock or dogs. The reality is, studies show cats are abused at higher rates than dogs or other domestic animals in almost every category of abuse — beating, throwing, mutilation, and drowning. However, the stereotypical cat vs. dog argument often causes the abuse of cats to be overshadowed. The general sentiment around cats is that they are difficult, stuck-up, mean animals, compared to the friendly companionship of dogs. This negative opinion of cats is due to their portrayal in the media. Consider Tom in Tom and Jerry, Lucifer in Cinderella, Mittens in Puss and Boots, or Gargamel's cat in Smurfs. Consider the concept of black cats being bad luck. Cats are portrayed as villains in every possible way, which results in animal abuse being inflicted on them the most.

I have been involved firsthand with lessening the abuse cats face. In my eyes, there are three parts to this process, finding the abuse, helping the victim, and solving the problem. I have not yet had much involvement in investigating abuse. Often, people who abuse animals are violent in other ways as well, and as I have only recently turned eighteen, it was not safe for me to participate in this part of the process. However, I have had a lot of involvement in the second step of the process. One of the things I like most about my work at the SPCA is we are


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considered not just a shelter, but a rehabilitation center. Our goal is to get the cats to a place where they can be happy living with a family. If this is not possible, our goal is to give the cats the best quality of life possible. This means a big part of my job is simply socializing with the cats to change their perception of humans. Cats that have been abused often come into the shelter very scared of humans, most of the time we can’t even touch them right away. My job is to provide an example of a safe, gentle human so that they can learn to get used to being around people. A cat that is afraid of humans is often unadoptable, but rather than writing these cats off, the other volunteers and I are patient and work on ways to give the cats a chance at a home.

Another way we have to help the victims is through medical care. Again, since I only recently turned eighteen, I am not allowed to administer much medical attention, but I often help with what I can. This includes administering medication, grooming, and helping to restrain animals during treatments. I have been involved firsthand in medical emergencies such as Tib's arrival at the shelter. He needed immediate treatment, and as I was one of the only volunteers there, I had to help. I set up a sterile environment for him to stay in, helped to restrain him so he could receive medical attention from a professional, and provided appropriate food for his needs.

Finally, I have also been involved in fixing the problem of cat abuse in many ways. Firstly, I am always on the lookout for strays, injured animals, hoarding situations, and other signs of abuse. I know how to recognize the signs, so it is my responsibility to look out for them. Next, I am always ready to help friends, family, and even strangers who need advice on cats. I am the first person my friends call if they find a stray animal, have a question about their pets, or really any situation involving cats. I know what protocol to follow and I am always willing to educate others on it. Finally, on my personal social media I try to provide positive posts about cats. From information about proper animal care to animal abuse awareness posts, to just
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collections of pictures of the shelter cats being cute. I try to use positive language when at all possible surrounding cats, and correct any false information I hear.

Though I have been able to help in some ways to prevent cat abuse, there is so much more I would like to do in the future. I think the two most important things to prevent animal abuse are education and, as strange as it may sound, reducing the stigma around mental health. Education is an obvious answer. If people understand that their perception of cats may be warped due to the image presented in the media, they are more likely to be open-minded toward the animals. Additionally, some abuse is simply the result of improper care. With properly provided education on cat temperament, medical care, and even things as simple as how to interact with stray animals, I believe we could greatly reduce the cat abuse we see worldwide. This education could be provided through advertisements on TV, billboards, or even just social media posts with facts about cats. Something that is less obvious is the way that mental health affects cat abuse. We have many cats at the shelter who suffered from hoarding situations. If we got mental health care for the person who was hoarding earlier, we may have been able to prevent this situation from getting bad enough that it permanently injured the cats. Additionally, a lot of people who injure animals do so because of a preexisting mental health problem such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or anger management disorder⁴. If we were able to provide greater access to care for those struggling, as well as reduce the stigma about mental health struggles, we would be able to prevent abuse cases before they even start.

In conclusion, everyone knows that animal abuse is a problem, but many do not consider just the extent of the effect it has on cats specifically. Due to the bad image created for cats in

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most popular media, those who are aware of the abuse or abusers simply do not have as much
alarm or empathy as they would have for a dog. I have been involved firsthand in preventing and
lessening the effects of this abuse during my time working at the Monroe SPCA, but there is still
so much more to be done.
Bibliography


