

Ambassador  Spotlight

The Right Time & Place



“Sunshine” is called a “survivor kitty” by adopter Karen Rundquist of The Cat Network.

About a year ago, during an atypically cool, rainy day in Miami, a teenage girl saw The Cat Network in her neighborhood and asked for help. In her hands, she held a kitten less than 2 months old, shivering and very ill. Karen Rundquist, a volunteer for The Cat Network, was working that day with the group’s Miami Meow Mobile, a mobile spay/neuter and adoption van.

Rundquist took the kitten to a veterinarian and went home, understanding the kitten, likely having eaten something poisonous and suffering epileptic seizures and blindness as a result, was near death. The next day, the veterinarian told a surprised Rundquist over the phone that the kitten was still alive. She claimed the kitten, named her “Sunshine,” and took her home.

“She’s a very special cat for me,” says Rundquist, a member of The Cat Network’s board of directors. “She’s not up for adoption.

“Sunshine is a survivor kitty, she wanted to live,” Rundquist continues. “There are certain cats that just touch your heart. She’s my girl, and I won’t let her go. But we all have special adoption stories we can tell. We just get excited about cats. It’s our passion.”

The Cat Network — with 150 to 250 active volunteers — does many things, but especially focuses on spaying and neutering cats in the Miami-Dade County area. It’s a task that Rundquist, Jill Steinberg and Sue Jackson agree is sometimes daunting. Each has been part of the rescue for eight to 13 years.

“There’s no timeout here,” says Steinberg,

secretary for The Cat Network. “We have 75-plus-degree weather most of the year. It’s kitten season nine or 10 months of the year.”

The reduced-price spay-neuter certificates The Cat Network offers its members helps to reduce cat overpopulation. Members buy the \$25 certificates, and then take abandoned cats to one of nearly 45 participating veterinarians for surgery. This results in around 6,000 spays and neuters a year.

Reaching out to the public, the group takes its spay and neuter effort to neighborhoods, where twice a week a veterinarian and assistant go into communities considered high in need, parking the Miami Meow Mobile as part of the “Beat the Heat” tour. In this case, the word “heat,” does not refer to warm weather.

The highly successful program allows people to spay and neuter their pets for \$40. Pets may also receive a rabies vaccination for \$5. For those who lack funds to afford the surgery, The Cat Network offers further discounts, aided by a contribution that started the Alfie’s Angel Fund. Between April and August this year, the tour tallied more than 1,000 surgeries.

“That’s 1,000 spay/neuter surgeries in just four months,” Steinberg says. “If we could do 2,000 more in the next eight months, then that would be really neat. Those are on top of the 6,000 surgeries a year we do with our member certificates.”

Since The Cat Network’s inception in 1995, the group has spayed and neutered more than 50,000 cats. The feline rescue group became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in 1997, fulfilling a goal of



founders Susan Fleming, Irma Barron, Edie Brodsky, Lynn MacCauley, Susan Pascall and Maria Gonzalez.

“We decided to become a 501(c)(3) when we organized The Cat Network in order to receive donations and be taken seriously,” Gonzalez says. “We knew we would have more opportunities to receive financial support.”

The Cat Network is also quite visible through the Miami-Dade County area placing cats in family homes. The organization operates adoption centers at four PetSmart, three PETCO and four Pet Supermarket stores, and makes occasional appearances at bookstores, grocery stores and other retail shops.

The cat rescue recently began showcasing cats available for adoption in the display window of Lilly Pulitzer, a women’s clothing store at a mall in north Dade County. Cats are dressed according to the

theme: Halloween costumes in October, tiger, panther and jaguar outfits for September’s mini zoo, and black-and-white clothing for July’s “All dressed up with hopefully somewhere to go” event. The store donates 10 percent of sales from the event to the rescue.



The Cat Network is highly visible in the Miami-Dade County area, thanks in part to longtime members, clockwise from top, Jill Steinberg, Sue Jackson and Karen Rundquist. Support comes from several dozen foster families and around 200 volunteers.

“You’ve never seen so many people taking pictures with their cell phones,” Steinberg says. “And the kids love it. The events draw a lot of interest and help get our message out to part of the county,

where we have fewer volunteers. This could help with that too.”

Jackson, who has been with The Cat Network since 1996, says the attention gained at the mall is the result of years of efforts. “In the beginning we had all questions and few answers about how to reach people,” she says. “But we’ve grown. It’s a grass-roots effort, and the pyramid is getting wider, wider, wider. We keep getting new volunteers, and that’s what keeps us going.”

The Cat Network is also a *Purina Pro Plan Rally to Rescue* Ambassador. “We think it’s pretty outstanding being part of *Rally to Rescue*,” Steinberg says. “We feel like we’re getting extra credit for the things we normally do because of the *Rally to Rescue* support we get. The *Rally to Rescue* banner, T-shirts and tent help create an avenue for us to distribute more information about what we do and the importance of adopting rescued animals.”

The growing list of volunteers and innovative ideas has also produced opportunities to address the diverse population of Miami. The Cat Network sends out a biannual newsletter called “Cat Network News” and a monthly e-newsletter, both with Spanish sections. Spanish language radio in the metropolitan area recently began broadcasting 14 public service announcements about the need to spay and neuter cats. The rescue’s Spanish-speaking volunteers help return phone calls and answer questions.

The Cat Network also has an online presence, with a Google group that sends out a “Dear Tabby” e-mail a few times a week and a Facebook page and Facebook Cause, which has raised \$4,000 in donations.

While numerous adoption events help spur adoptions, with several dozen foster families attending and helping to find homes for the 600 to 700 cats being cared for at any time, it’s the Miami Meow Mobile that has the greatest potential for getting a grip on the abandoned cat population in the Floridian tropics. “It’s a very cost-effective method,” Jackson says.

Of course, Rundquist has a particularly personal connection with the spay/neuter and adoption van. “If the Meow Mobile hadn’t been there that day, Sunshine wouldn’t be alive,” Rundquist says. “We were in the right place at the right time.” ♦

The Cat Network

To learn more about The Cat Network, please visit www.thecatnetwork.org. You also may send an e-mail to info@thecatnetwork.org or call (305) 255-3482.

