

## Cat Lover: Tiburon woman, group aid pets in need

Beth Ashley

If someone you knew died suddenly and entrusted you with 30 orphaned cats, what would you do?

If you were a cat lover like Ann Allen, you would simply try to find homes for them - however daunting a job that might sound.

Two years after Matt Gale died in Oakland, Allen and friends have placed all but seven of his 30 cats - and she is working on placing the rest.

Only someone like Allen - who has been rescuing animals since she was a little girl - would have the passion and dedication to make sure these cats and dozens of others are placed with people who will love them.

Allen, 62, a Tiburon resident, is the founder and shining light of a 10-year-old nonprofit called Marin Cat Connection, dedicated to rescuing homeless, orphaned or abandoned cats.

With the help of 40 volunteers, she also traps feral cats, has them neutered or spayed and returned to a safe neighborhood on the streets. "She goes out with her trap in the middle of the night," says volunteer Kent Jeffrey, a fan.

She also rescues the kittens of feral cats, neuters and spays them as well, and puts them in foster care until they can be adopted.

She figures she arranges 250 adoptions a year and has 125 animals spayed and neutered.

It's not much, considering the huge numbers of stray cats now roaming Marin.

But every one she rescues and neuters means hundreds more that won't reproduce.

"Statistics show that in seven years, a single female cat can be responsible for the birth of more than 400,000 offspring," Allen says.

She founded Marin Cat Connection "because I wanted to do something to stem the tide."

A delicate blonde and onetime flight attendant for PanAm, Allen left behind a thriving career in real estate to devote herself to animals. At first, she rescued dogs, including an 8-year-old bearded collie that became her own pet.

Then she went to work for the Marin Humane Society, first as a volunteer, later as adoption coordinator, and she became aware of the "overwhelming" problem of homeless cats. She quit her job to form her agency.

In her impeccably kept home behind Bel Aire shopping center, she keeps two cats of her own, Martha and Lizzie, and has converted one bedroom into her own "foster cat" center: a brightly lit room overlooking a flower garden, lined with airy cages filled with cat beds and feeding trays and tiny, slumbering kittens.

One afternoon last week, one cage held three black kittens, another a brown tabby named Carson, and another a gray-and-white tuxedo kitten named Ella, who was to be delivered that evening to her new owner, a 14-year-old girl in Novato.

The girl had spotted Ella at Petco in Montecito Shopping Center, where Allen and other kitty foster parents display adoptable felines two days a week: Friday evenings from 4 to 7 p.m., and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

"We don't have a shelter," Allen says, "so Petco is where we do it."



Friend of felines: Cat Connection's Ann Allen poses with Jeb, one of the orphaned cats she aids in finding a safe home. Cat Connection serves as an animal rescue as well as a placement service through which kittens can be adopted. Special to the IJ/Kevin Hagen

When not caring for her foster kittens, or supervising the showing of adult cats and kittens at Petco, Allen is constantly on the phone, getting reports of people who have spotted a feral cat, taking notes about cats whose owners have died or are moving away, encouraging people who might want to volunteer or give money.



Tabby kitten Yoda is under the care of Cat Connection, a cat rescue operation that places cats with families. The agency shows the cats every Friday night and Saturday day at Petco in San Rafael.

"I get 50 calls a week," she says, "and I try to use them to educate people." Usually, she is hoping to turn a caller into a volunteer: she'll come trap a feral cat, but might the caller like to become a trapper, too?

Allen and volunteer trappers use humane traps to catch the cats. She also needs volunteers to become foster parents to abandoned cats and kittens.

She would love to find a volunteer with the skills to "socialize" a kitten.

"Often kittens that have lived in the wild have no reason to trust humans. They need to learn." She already has one such volunteer, but needs more. "There are a lot of people who are very knowledgeable about working with shy kittens."

A longtime volunteer, Claire Colvin of Corte Madera, has been a foster mom to homeless cats for 10 years, caring for them in her

home and showing them on Saturdays at Petco. "Every one of them has been adopted," she says. "Sometimes it takes a week. Sometimes it takes nine months."

Colvin has an ally in her husband, Bill Green, who cares for her foster cats when she is out of town, sometimes three weeks at a time, taking language lessons in Italy. "We're both real lovers of cats."

An admirer of Allen - "she's doing so much for so many animals" - Colvin says fostering cats "makes a big difference in my life. I feel like I'm doing something worthwhile."

Anyone who can volunteer help of any kind may call Allen at 381-1440.

One longtime fan is Jeffrey, a Kentfield resident and former airline pilot, who first called Marin Cat Connection when a cat in his neighborhood was "left behind" when its owner moved. He later adopted two cats himself. When Matt Gale, who had rescued 30 cats on his own, became ill and contacted Marin Cat Connection for help, Jeffrey agreed to take the cats and care for them.

Jeffrey converted a downstairs room into a cat dormitory. Hoping to place each cat in a welcoming home, he and Allen made a video called "Matt's Cats" which has been widely shown to prospective owners.

Jeffrey still has seven Matt's Cats looking for homes. He calls Allen "an unsung hero."

"Between around-the-clock bottle-feeding of neonatal kittens placed in her bathtub, countless trips to the vet, trapping feral cats late at night, not to mention fielding scores of phone calls every week from people in need of help or advice, it's hard to imagine how Ann finds time to sleep and eat. I think sometimes she doesn't."

Jeffrey points out that the Cat Connection does not compete with the Marin Humane Society, but "complements it." The Humane Society does not have a trap-neuter-and-return program and only covers the cost of spaying and neutering if someone else traps and brings in a feral cat.

Allen says the society has begun lending traps to people to catch feral cats, and issues vouchers to have these animals spayed and neutered.

"We do more," Allen says. "We trap the cats. We take the kittens into our program."

Operating expenses for the Cat Connection are raised through donations, garage sales and occasional fundraising events. The annual budget is about \$40,000, which helps pay for cat supplies, traps, vet bills and a newsletter. Adoption fees help cover spay and neutering, vaccinations, insertion of identity microchips.

Allen mourns the plight of so many abandoned or feral cats.

"We are a very disposable society when it comes to animals," she says.

"It is heartbreaking because of the sad reality of what happens to these cats. But I feel very good about finding homes. We're making it better - and that's good."