



The Power of *Purr*

Improving lives with prison-based cat fostering programs

BY NANCY PETERSON



With a reputation for belligerent outbursts—he was known for hurling wet-floor cones at corrections officers—Shawn was the last guy prison staff imagined having a soft spot.

But when Purrfect Pals, a cat shelter in Arlington, Wash., started bringing foster kittens to the Monroe Correctional Complex, where Shawn was incarcerated, he got his act together in order to qualify to work with the animals. He showed his gentle side with the kittens, a shift that brought him positive attention from prison staff who formerly had little patience for his antics.

He's one of many inmates who have helped cats through the Kitten Connections program at the prison in Monroe, Wash. The program is largely the brainchild of two dedicated women: Carol Grandmontagne, former associate superintendent at the prison, and Kathryn Grey, M.S.W., former supervisor of the Correctional Mental Health Unit. While other prisons are doing cat foster programs, the Monroe program is rare in that most participating offenders have a mental illness.

As a social worker, Grey wanted to act as a change agent within Monroe, motivating people in the special offenders unit—the housing area for those who are mentally ill or otherwise unable to live in the general prison population—to make positive changes in their lives. Prison management thought dogs would be too difficult, she says, because they'd have to be taken out and would need kennel space. Some staff were also concerned offenders might train dogs to be aggressive. But with Grandmontagne's support, Grey put together a proposal for the cat fostering program the prison launched in 2005.

Sue Weaver, a former volunteer with Purrfect Pals, delivered the first litter of kittens to the prison in January 2006 and managed the program until December 2012.

Other Purrfect Pals staff and volunteers have carried on with the program since Weaver left. They provide each kitten with a carrier, which remains in the inmate's room, and all the animal's food, litter, and toys. The prison accommodates up to 12 kittens at a time; in March, the prison had a celebration to mark the fostering of its 500th kitten.

The kittens are pulled from local shelters, primarily Everett Animal Services in Everett, Wash., and are examined by Purrfect Pals veterinarian Stacy Morgan-Wolfe. Some then go on to foster parents, who willingly take on tame and adoptable kitties who either need medical treatment or must grow big enough to be altered. But few want to take on poorly socialized kittens because of the time involved in turning them around.

Prison inmates, on the other hand, have all the time in the world.

"A lot of these kitties that we send to the prison would end up being euthanized if it weren't for the program because they're too hissy, too growly, too shy for people to want to adopt," says Weaver.

Regardless of temperament, kittens stay in foster homes for at least 10 days or until they're 7 weeks old and have been vaccinated. Seven-week-old kittens who go to the prison usually stay for four weeks. The prison takes in unaltered kittens up to 4 months of age (to avoid having kittens in heat), along with older kittens who have been altered.

Purrfect Pals representatives give a 20-minute orientation to every inmate fostering kittens. Inmates learn to look for dehydration, signs of upper respiratory infection, ringworm, parasites, and other common illnesses, says Purrfect Pals foster care manager Susan Bark. They also keep a daily observation log and work closely with Purrfect Pals staff to determine when a kitten is ready for adoption.

At the beginning, Grey was concerned about the possibility of animal cruelty, but only two offenders have ever been removed from the program. She has found that inmates monitor each other, reporting their concerns about any problems that arise.

"We know that if something bad happens, our reputation's on the line and we could lose the whole program, so we try to be incredibly careful," says Grey, noting that the criteria to join the program are quite stringent. Participants have to have a good behavior record to qualify for and remain in the program.

When the program was new, Grey didn't realize that kittens could scoot so fast, and the very first day, one was seriously injured by a heavy automatic closing door. The kitten later died. It was devastating to everyone, but has never reoccurred: Rules were instituted requiring any offender who leaves his room for any length of time to

secure his kitten in a carrier before the door is opened. Failure to follow this rule will result in an automatic suspension from the program.

If the fosterer leaves his room for more than a couple of hours, babysitters—typically offenders who find it too stressful to have a kitten full-time, or too upsetting to give the animal up—can have the kittens in their rooms. Babysitters must meet the exact same criteria as the foster parents. For offenders who are allergic or don't want to be around the animals, Grey keeps one of the two prison pods kitten-free.

There's a secure area where kittens can interact with each other, fosterers, and offenders who come to watch the kittens and play with them. Socialization time also helps supervising staff get to know the kittens and make sure they're doing well. Although another social worker, Patrick Fenton, M.S.W., formerly helped to manage all the day-to-day issues, overall staff involvement is minimal; the offenders pretty much run the program.

Purrfect Pals brings new kittens to the prison and collects those ready for adoption. Those kittens are sterilized (if they aren't already), and get their final vaccines, health checks, and adoption clearance before they go to a Purrfect Pals adoption event at the Everett PetSmart.

Some kittens don't even make it to an adoption event. "When we've got a crop that are leaving," says Grey, "we'll notice strange [staff] faces around their unit from all over the prison, coming to eyeball who we've got so they can get their favorites." On Grey's unit alone, 45 kittens have been adopted by prison staff.

Initially, Grey took a lot of ribbing when inmates appeared with their carriers in the prison yard during fire drills. Now it's become protocol. Grey says correctional officers will even say, "Ninety-six offenders, seven cats," before they clear the drill.

Grey has now moved on to another position in the prison. But she believes the program she helped start has been valuable, and she is happy to share the prison's protocols with people interested in starting something similar. "What we want is to send offenders out less angry than when they came in, because angry people are dangerous people," she says. "And this has a very calming influence, and also it teaches these guys responsibility, and they feel like they're giving back."

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— Sue Weaver, former volunteer, Purrfect Pals

Opposite Page: Foster cat Amaryllis snuggles up to Monroe Correctional Complex inmate Gary Grant during a party celebrating the 500th cat to go through the fostering program that prisoners run in conjunction with Purrfect Pals cat sanctuary.



Inmate Kris Howe holds foster cat Cecily while talking with Purrfect Pals' Susan Bark during the recent celebration. "It was really heartwarming to hear the inmates' stories on how the kittens really bring meaning into their lives," says Bark.

Adding a Program for Cat People

The Humane Society of Madison County and Madison Correctional Institution in London, Ohio, had already teamed up on a dog program. But it wasn't until one of the inmates, McNaught, asked shelter director Betty Peyton if the prison could foster cats—"cause I'm not a dog person," he told her—that the feline set came into the picture.

The very next week, the shelter received six orphaned bottle babies, and Peyton got clearance from the prison to bring the first kittens there. After some initial administrative hurdles, the Fresh Start Feline program has purred along, and approximately 330 kittens have gone through the program since it started about six years ago.

Inmates apply to be kitten handlers, and once they're approved, they're moved into a kitten-approved cell.

Kittens have the run of their fosterer's cell, and as long as the kittens have been FeLV/FIV tested and wormed, they can be brought elsewhere in the facility, such as the dayroom, to mingle and run around.

The inmates care for bottle babies and kittens who are too small to be altered; the animals stay at the prison until they reach a certain weight, when they can be adopted. When it doesn't have very young kittens, the shelter sends adult cats to get extra exercise and loving.

A registered veterinary technician who works for the shelter provides training, going to the prison to discuss proper care, especially for the bottle babies. "If those kittens sneeze or do anything, we're hearing about it [from the inmates]," says Peyton.

The kittens are highly socialized when they return to the shelter. Their cage cards, which say "fostered at prison," draw queries from potential adopters.

Other than screening participating inmates, prison staff involvement is minimal (though 30 kittens have been adopted by prison staff!). A staff member supervises the program and reviews inmates' past job performance and discipline history to determine if they meet the screening criteria. Prior experience with cats is taken into account.

A festive cake marked the 500th kitten to go through the program at Monroe.



Inmates who participate are very appreciative, says Peyton. “Some of those guys never have visitors. If it weren’t for this—not just the cats, I’m talking about dogs, too—some of these guys wouldn’t have anything, and they will tell you that.”

According to Virginia Workman, chief of unit management at Madison Correctional, many inmates become depressed in prison. Caring for an animal helps them fight the blues and teaches empathy and responsibility. “I think it gives our offenders an acceptable outlet to feel love and to show a softer side of himself in a setting that does not promote these feelings or behavior,” Workman says. “It is amazing to see a full-grown man stand in front of you with a tiny kitten in one hand and tell you why there is not another kitten like his in the world.”

It made a huge difference to McNaught, the inmate who suggested the program. Peyton says he’d had a reputation for being a guy who “could have started a riot by snapping his fingers,” but he became a model citizen once he got kittens. “It really did change him, I mean, a lot,” Peyton says, “and that’s the thing about these programs. They’re there to help the guys, too.” When McNaught got released, he went through the shelter’s adoption process and took home his last kitten, Tater.

Overcoming Past Problems

Allen Oakwood Correctional Institution in Lima, Ohio, was already working with rescue groups to provide temporary homes for cats. But the warden didn’t want to allow more because a rescue group that once participated in the program never picked up its cats, and they became permanent residents.

Little wonder that Krissi Hawke, shelter coordinator for the Humane Society Serving Clark County in Springfield, Ohio, had to struggle to get in the door in 2008. “I had more paperwork than I’ve ever seen in my entire life,” says Hawke. She was required to write a proposal, create an application, and develop a quiz to test the cat knowledge of inmates who wanted to participate. In the proposal, she promised to replace the cats regularly, and set a limit of about three months for the longest stay.

Hawke created a list of job responsibilities for fosterers, which included keeping a journal about their cat, and recording everything from litter box training to socialization and their cats’ medical needs.

Her hard work paid off. “When [prison officials] told me, ‘Yes, go ahead, we’ll let you do this,’ I started crying. I mean, not having to euthanize a semiferal cat—come on, how many shelters do?”

There was one unanticipated problem: The shelter is two and half hours from the prison, and didn’t have its own veterinarian in Lima. Prison program cats who got

Resources

For more on shelter/prison collaborations, check out these stories:

- animalsheltering.org/insideout
- animalsheltering.org/penpals
- animalsheltering.org/breeze_of_goodness

sick had to go to an emergency veterinarian, which was costly. But now Hawke has a veterinarian lined up in Lima, as well as transport between the prison and the clinic.

When Hawke started out, she could have one cat at the prison at a time; now she can have seven. As of mid-March, she’s technically on prison cat 70, but *actually* on 150 because orphaned litters and moms with kittens are counted as one cat.

Program kittens who are big enough to be spayed or neutered return to the shelter for vaccinations and surgery, and then go up for adoption in the shelter’s cat room or at a PetSmart partner. “When somebody comes in and they’re looking through our cat room and they want to see little Fluffy, it will say on the cat’s shelter ticket, ‘Prison cat number whatever,’ and folks are always like, ‘What does this mean?’” says Hawke. “Then we show them the [inmate’s] journal, and we can sit and tell them stories.”

Kevin Jones, deputy warden of special services at Allen Oakwood Correctional Institution, oversees its pet programs. He emphasizes that buy-in from the inmates, staff, and the community is very important to the programs’ success. “The institution is able to have these animals adopted out into the community, and it helps the offenders cope with their current situations,” he says.



A cat at the Correctional Industrial Facility in Pendleton, Ind., snuggles up to a goodie bag provided by a local scouting group.

prison foster cats

Participating inmates are screened by prison staff. Approval is based upon their offense, behavior while incarcerated, mental health status, and other factors, and since they're giving care to the animals 24 hours a day, they're supervised by staff all the time. While people in prison always lose their rights to privacy, those who volunteer for the foster program have even less, Hawke says, because they have corrections officers and coordinators coming into their cells at any given time to check on the animals. Though some in the community questioned putting animals with prisoners, Hawke has never had an inmate abuse one of their animals.



Top: Monroe inmate Sean Morin takes foster kitten Begonia out of her crate. Participants in the cat fostering program are carefully monitored to ensure they're keeping the animals safe.

Bottom: The cardboard cover on a cell toilet in the Pendleton facility keeps this kitty from drinking from the potty.

"It's such a privilege to be able to have an animal in prison," Hawke says, "I have never had an issue that would turn me against this training program. It's saved countless, countless lives."

Cats for the Long Haul

Most of the cats who go through the Nine Lives Club program at the Correctional Industrial Facility in Pendleton, Ind., don't get adopted. "People assume that those [cats in the prison] are safe, so they will adopt adult cats from the shelter as opposed to the prison," says Maleah Stringer, director of the Animal Protection League in Anderson, Ind., which works with the prison. While it doesn't result in a huge number of adoptions,

the program helps the shelter avoid space-based euthanasia and provides a service opportunity for the inmates.

Stringer says that any shelter contemplating a prison foster program needs a core group of volunteers who are invested in the program—it's a lot of work and responsibility. Volunteers don't interact with inmates, but they still need to understand the nature of the prison system, and follow prison rules.

Stringer, who does interact with inmates, says going into the prison environment was a challenge. When she first went, she had to remain aloof and not respond to the inmates' yelling and catcalls. Those behaviors stopped after some of her dog-handling inmates saw she was upset and asked what happened; Stringer suspects they intervened with the heckling inmates. She stresses the importance of not viewing prisoners as friends, and is always accompanied by a prison staff member when she runs orientations or meets with inmates.

Wendy Knight, superintendent of the Correctional Industrial Facility, says she had no concerns about welcoming cats. She has seen their calming effect on the inmates—some of whom, she notes, are taking responsibility for someone else for the first time in their lives.

Like other prison pet programs, the Correctional Industrial Facility has strict criteria that inmates have to meet. Inmates with offenses against animals cannot participate; those who do participate must stay out of trouble or may be removed from the program. The guys who get the pets truly understand that it's a privilege to have them, Knight says.

One staff member helps take care of routine necessities, such as cat food and litter, and counselors and case managers assist if something's wrong with a cat or an inmate needs something for his animal. Staff enjoy the cats' presence, but the felines are really in the hands of the inmates.

Stringer says that inmates have told her that they've never had unconditional love with someone who counts on them and gives that love back to them. Some inmates become adopters upon their release, relying on their family or significant others to go through the adoption process for them. Knight remembers one inmate saying, "Ms. Knight, I've had this cat for three years and done such a good job taking care of it. I've sent pictures home to my family, and Maleah's gonna let us adopt it and take it home."

Stringer recommends that anyone considering a prison foster program talk to others with an established program. "There's no reason to reinvent the wheel, because we all know what's working, what doesn't work, because we've all tried it and suffered the consequences," she says. "I kind of look at it as one of the best things I've ever done." ■