

Ferals – From Nola to Forks

November 2005 – December 2005

Volunteers are very important to saving pets and wildlife after natural disasters. Without these wonderful volunteers, many would perish. After Katrina, because of these dedicated people, over 65 feral cats, two puppies, 5 tame cats headed to their new homes instead of euthanasia statistics.

Hurricane Katrina barreled through the New Orleans area on August 29th, 2005. It weakened the levies which later gave way causing destructive flooding. Many citizens evacuated, per the governor's order, leaving only 3 days of food for their pets. The Governor told the citizens they would only be gone three days maximum. However, with the flooding mentioned above, many parts of NOLA were destroyed and pets either killed or injured or left to starve as many owners were not allowed to return to their homes for weeks. Organizations answered the call with volunteers and started to rescue the pets left behind. Because homes were damaged and destroyed, many pets were wandering the streets. This meant the rescuers couldn't tell if the cats or dogs were pets or feral because all were very frightened and hiding their true demeanor. Once caught, it would take days before they could tell if they were feral or not. Often, longer was needed.

Some volunteers were charged with the care of the animals caught. Cage cleaning multiple times a day and feedings were done without complaint. The volunteers understood the horror these animals went through. To make room for more rescues some animals needed to be sent to other rescue organizations which came to help. This meant the volunteers in charge of the care of these frightened animals had to determine if a dog or cat was feral or frightened. If feral, most rescues would not take them. The rescues had to make sure they could either reunite the animal with their rightful owners or be able to place them in new homes. Records and pictures of where the animal was caught was often the only information we had to locate/verify the owners. If they were feral, either option would not happen so they would most likely have to euthanize them.

It was my job, for almost 2 months, to determine which cats were frightened in a short period of time and which were actually feral. By the end of my time with Muttshack there were 60+ ferals remaining along with 5 domestic cats which were very frightened and needed working with or had an owner not ready to accept their precious baby back yet as their home was destroyed and they needed to rebuild.

In the end of November of 2005, the time for Muttshack's help was coming to an end as the school location we worked from wanted their school back to start the repairs to their facility. This meant all the animals needed to be relocated. But what to do with the 60+ ferals was now the big question.



A call was put out requesting a location or locations to take them to. Judy McCarthy, of Dandelion Dog Rescue in Forks, Clallam County, Washington State which has a feral-cat colony stepped up and said they could take in the ferals. But how to get them there was now the issue until a kind hearted truck driver volunteered his climate controlled semi-truck for the transport, via the Humane Society.

Sandra and I got the cages chosen that would fit in the truck. They would line each side of the truck leaving just enough room for a person to walk down the middle. Sandra and other volunteers gathered the supplies of food, litter, garbage bags, cleaning supplies, water, first aid for animals and people, people supplies, etc.... I took this time to make sure the cats I chose as feral were feral and their records were attached to their cages and marking the cages of those cats with FeLv and FIV. I also made sure the cats I was going to adopt/foster were marked too – a couple of these cats would be in the minivan with us as they were still frightened or needed extra health care.

The day came to load the truck with the cats. Their cages were cleaned and brought to the truck. Sandra and I organized how they would be placed in the truck. I knew which cat should be separated by cardboard pieces as they would attack the cat in the cage next to them without that barrier. We also had to make sure the cages wouldn't move around in the truck. We anchored them to the truck as they were loaded. We were lucky that most of them were on a single layer. I was also lucky that I had lost 30 lbs in the 2 months I was there so I fit the best in the truck between the cages. Sandra chose the outdoor duties.



We stopped twice a day on our trip to Forks, over 2800 miles. During these stops Sandra and I had the cage cleaning routine set. I would open a cage carefully making sure the cat wouldn't escape. I pulled out the litter box and gave it to Sandra. She would empty it, clean it and refill it. This was a challenge as finding a water source for cleaning was often difficult. We needed that water to clean the litter pans and to fill the water bowls. While Sandra did that I would clean the



cage, if needed and if I could do it safely. I would refill the water and then I would put the litter box back while Sandra refilled the food bowl.



We opted to provide dry food only for less of a mess. If a cat seemed to be extremely frightened we would cover the cage with a towel (except for one side) to help them feel more secluded and safe. It helped when the truck doors were closed because the lights would go out. The climate control unit also created a "white noise" to help keep them calm as it ran 100% of the time.



We followed the truck all the way. Truck drivers are very protective of each other. We had walkie talkies for the driver and ourselves. On a few occasions we had to let our driver know another truck driver was bothering us. It seems that sometimes cars would travel in the wake of a truck to cut down on the drag on a car to increase the gas

efficiency, called drafting. Truck drivers do not like this they cannot not see the car behind them. Some truck drivers thought this was what we were doing and tried to get between us and our truck. We would have to tell our truck driver what was happening and he would get on the CB and try to reach the driver trying to cut us off to let them know we were with him. One time was a bit nerve wracking as three trucks were trying to separate us from our truck driver.

We spent a night in a motel using two rooms for Sandra and myself to keep the puppies away from the sick cat that needed medical assistance and close monitoring which Sandra took charge of. Her name was Miss Hissy.



She was born from a union between a woman's cat and a wild Lynx. Miss Hissy therefore had no tail like her dad but had calico coloring like her Mom. The owner had left her behind with her 2 dogs and her home was destroyed. I do not know what happened to her dogs, but Miss Hissy

survived – barely. When the owner returned to her home, Miss Hissy would not stay there and repeatedly went to the neighbor's home instead. Hissy seemed frightened which surprised the owner as Miss Hissy had always been a fearless cat. The owner asked our rescue group if we could care for Hissy while the owner rebuilt her home enough for Miss Hissy to come home. But while with Muttsack I noticed she was getting sick. I pointed out to a fellow rescuer, Lucy, and she saw this too and knew of a vet who had returned to NOLA and we took Miss Hissy immediately to this vet as quickly as we did. Bloodwork was done and she was found to have parasites in her blood which would certainly have killed her had we not gotten her to this vet. This meant she had been in the flood waters which had followed the hurricane. She must have been very frightened. No wonder why she didn't want to go back to the home she had been trapped in. When it came time to leave with the truck we could not reach the owner. So I offered to care for Miss Hissy until we could reach the owner. At that time we could arrange Miss Hissy's journey back to her. At this point we did not know how old she was. We kept Miss

Hissy in the van with us so we could give her the attention she needed and to make sure she was doing ok on the long drive.

I had the care of two puppies, Daisy and Penny. We often wondered if Penny thought she was a cat as she had been housed in the cattery since Penny had been claimed by me. Both were a handful in the motels. Well, Daisy was. She was the smaller of the two but more stubborn and outgoing. She was most likely older than Penny but was on the small side due to lack of food. The day our rescuers picked up the dogs/cats from the other rescue, Daisy had been on the schedule for euthanasia that day. After the proper quarantine and food, she was able to join in the transport .

Each time we started our journey we were serenaded by 2 puppies barking and 5 cats meowing until they tired themselves out. Ear plugs were definitely thought of but we just toughed it out.

The first time we had to open the back of the truck was at a weigh station.



The officials wanted to see what was inside. I was scared to death that a cage may have opened during the drive and the officials would not see a loose cat and know to close the doors quickly before it would escape. I couldn't get out of the car fast enough before they opened the truck doors. I startled these officials by running up behind them. After

explaining why I did that, they understood but told me to never do that again. Fortunately no cat got out of their cage during the entire trip.

We enjoyed the landscape as we drove through each state. I loved to take pictures as we passed some very lovely scenery. It marveled us at how different states seemed to have such different landscapes.

We finally got to the location in Forks, Wa for the feral cat colony. Now picture this – a huge Semi-truck trying to back into a single car wide and curving driveway with tall trees on either side going down a hill to the building.



But this driver was so experienced he was able to back in slowly, without harming any of the trees and staying for the most part on the driveway making it to where we had to unload the cats near the building. Sandra and I were amazed at how he could do that. The building was a home that was converted into a huge cat house – for real cats. haha

Now came the time to inspect the location. There was an indoor room for the ferals and many cats were already there. It was set up as if it were really a home setting to help them feel more comfortable. They would work with some who didn't seem as feral to help them become domesticated and then find them forever homes.



It didn't look the best but they also had an outdoor area too. The FIV and FeLv cats were kept upstairs they said in the same type of home setting. They had vets they trusted to help any cat needing medical attention. Sandra and I talked about this for a while on whether we really liked this location. But the biggest part of our decision

was if we didn't leave these cats there, where would we take them? So we started to unload the cages. The cats already there seemed comfortable, healthy and well fed, so ours should be ok there.

As we unloaded them, there were two cats I changed my mind on – Jean Lafitte (FeLv+) and Gwen. I knew deep inside my heart they were frightened ferals and probably wouldn't thrive there. I had worked with Jean LaFitte at the shelter and he started to trust me. He no longer spit and hissed at me but most certainly kept his eyes on my every move. I was saddened when I found out about his FeLv+ status just before we left on this trip. I thought about how he would fit safely into our home and between my husband and I we figured it out. We had a vet who was a fearless woman and willing to help us with all the “ferals” we would bring to her. And we did. Each one had a health check-up and re-check for FIV and FeLv. Gwen was the biggest challenge even though she was the smallest cat. The vet told us “she dusted all our counters for us and tried to wash the floors for us by spilling the mop bucket.”

Gwen was just a small girl and had just started to relax at the shelter too. We worried about her due to her size and fear level. Sandra's husband, Scott, had affection for Gwen trying to get her to eat when she first arrived at the shelter. He did wonders with her. We knew she was a tortoiseshell but she had remained curled up in a self-defense type of position. It wasn't until just before the big journey to Forks that she sat up for Scott and we saw the beautifully different calico coloring she had on her chest.

Fortunately Gwen and Jean Lafitte fit into the minivan with the 5 other cats, 2 puppies and two humans and supplies.

When the Semi was unloaded we swept it out the best we could. We knew our driver would need to sanitize it of course but we wanted to make his cleaning job a bit easier.

Once we were done we all got dinner together and said goodbye to our Truck driver. He was absolutely wonderful during this whole trip.

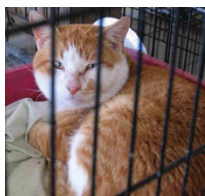
Sandra and I went on to my home. I realized after we unloaded the minivan and Sandra left that I had been a grumpy person. Sandra had a friend pick her up from our home. We both worked hard during this trip and were very tired. I later apologized to her for my grumpiness and thanked her for all her help. We couldn't have accomplished this without each other and all the volunteers involved in making this happen.

When I returned the minivan it was no longer clean on the outside but almost covered completely with the dirt from driving behind the semi all the way. We had concentrated on cleaning the interior that we didn't even think of the exterior.



I didn't realize how bad it was and if I had I certainly would have gone through a car wash on the way. Oh, well. We got the puppies and 7 cats settled. Yes, 7 cats.

We kept the 6 cats and worked with them so they would fit into our home.



Bubba sadly passed away shortly after as he had FIV. He was the sweetest of them all. All he wanted was love from anyone he could. Because he had been an intact male for all his life he had those handsome male cat jowls which made him so handsome. We had a home lined up for him until we found out about his FIV status. So we kept him as comfortable as we could for the time he was with us.

Trickster, an Orange and White Maine Coon, had to find a home as he was not getting along with one of our original cats, Sammy. Fortunately the person that wanted him had experience with Maine Coons and her current Maine Coon cat was going to pass away soon of old age and cancer. By the time we got Trickster to her, her cat had passed away.



Gwen, who had been found outside near the Camelot Estates, was coming out of her shell and was adopted by our girl cats as a sister. We had first thought she was about 6 months old due to small size. But our vet said she was at least a few years old.



Jean Lafitte lived with us for about a year before the FeLV took him. In the end he trusted me enough to pet him. He had been a true feral and had to be at least 10 years old per our vet. We were amazed at how long he lasted on the streets.

Hello Kitty, we later named Chloe, also lived about a year with us. She had been marked as a kitten of 6 months old upon intake. However, when I first saw her I knew she was at least 15 years old and asked another one of the volunteer vets to look at her again. I wrote down what age I thought her to be on a piece of paper and gave it to the vet which the vet did not look at until she herself determined Chloe's age. After the exam, the vet said at least 15 years old and was amazed I knew that. I told her we had a tuxedo over 15 at home so it was easy for me to see the similarities. Her meow sounded like someone said "hello". Chloe also only had 2 teeth left which meant she needed to be on wet food. Because she had been thought to be a kitten she had only been given hard food which explained some of her weight loss. She confused a volunteer one day when the



volunteer was alone in the room with Chloe. Chloe would meow her hello and the volunteer would look for the person saying it. She really thought someone was playing a trick on her until we figured out it was Hello Kitty.

Miss Hissy (pictured above at our home) was off her meds by the time she got to our home. She was gaining back the weight she had quickly lost from the blood infection. She fit in so well and loved hanging out with our dogs more than our other cats. I finally was able to reach the owner to see how to get Miss Hissy back to her. The owner was so grateful that we took care of her but due to Hissy's age, she wondered if it would be too much to uproot her again. The owner was crying at the thought of letting her go but she knew Miss Hissy wouldn't be happy at her old home since she wouldn't stay there before. I asked her how old Hissy was and the owner told me she was 15 years old. What?! She didn't look that old. The owner said she saw her cat mating with a Lynx and helped in the birthing of these babies. She kept Miss Hissy. The owner asked if we would be willing to keep her since she was happy with us. Then she explained that Miss Hissy was raised with Pitbulls and Rotties and held her own with all. So, Miss Hissy lived with us until she passed away at 23 years old. A beautiful flowering bush marks her resting place and is the first to bloom each year.

Charger came out of his shell pretty quickly once we got him to a home



environment. I knew he would. Charger had been caught with another cat in an apartment. But the other cat was ill and needed to be in the vet area for a while. During this time, Charger wouldn't eat and was very sad. The person in charge of the cattery at the time and myself got the idea to put the girl next to Charger. Once she was, Charger ate and seemed much happier. He had been so misunderstood at the shelter.

A Rescue came to MuttsHACK and chose the girl cat to take to help make room for more rescues. I argued against this choice for Charger's sake, but lost. I felt so sad for him. We were instructed by the head of the cattery that only she was to care for Charger. This was due to his aggression,

she said. Upon intake he had bitten the vet which put him on a mandatory 10 day hold to check for rabies. Since then he would hiss and spit at everyone who came near his cage. But there was a day when this person was not around to feed and clean his cage. So I did. I was the one who named him Charger because when the volunteers opened the cage to clean he would charge them. So on this morning I charged him back and he flew to the back of his cage and watched me. I cleaned his cage and fed him and then left him a special treat. He tolerated me after that. When the head of the cattery found out I could safely care for Charger she told me I was now the head of the cattery and she could finally go home.

Charger had issues with his eye and nose (as seen in the photo above) but the vet could not get close enough to see what it was to be able to treat it. I used my camera to take this photo and then zoomed in on these areas and the vet was able to identify what it was and give the proper medication to clear it up.

Before the final trip, another volunteer saw in Charger what I saw in that he just needed someone to believe in him and love him. She was right. Our favorite thing about Charger was his attempt at head butting without actually making contact with your head as he closed his eyes when he tried. He was a Turkish Van.

He stayed with us for the remainder of his life as we felt he had already been through so much and was easily frightened. He needed that stable home we could offer.

Once home the Seattle Times heard about our journey and came and did a newspaper article about our trip. Because of that article, a local pet store gave us 6 months of free cat food for them which was very much appreciated.

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Wild! Cats from New Orleans have advocate in Woodinville woman

By Ranny Green

Seattle Times desk editor

When Mary Jarman Karr of Woodinville flew to New Orleans on Oct. 15 to help rescue displaced Hurricane Katrina pets, she had intended to return in a week.

Seven weeks later, Karr finally made the 3,300-mile journey home, with a truckful of unlikely passengers: 63 cats, including 35 that were feral.

Feral cats — those who have had little or no contact with humans — are often overlooked in animal-rescue situations, says Karr.

"They are the stepchildren of animal welfare," she says. "They have very few advocates, but they're living beings, too, and deserve a chance to survive. Now there is no one in New Orleans to create the garbage they used to eat or warm the homes they used to hide beneath.

Besides, the ground is so toxic, most will eventually get sick and die. So they do need help to survive."

In New Orleans, Karr, 46, joined the nonprofit MuttShack Animal Rescue Foundation, sleeping in her minivan after working 16-hour days at a shelter in a flood-ravaged school. Her job included cleaning cages, feeding cats and searching neighborhoods for pets locked in homes or lost on the streets foraging for food.

While there, Karr realized the stray and homeless cats included a large population of ferals, and decided to make rescuing them part of her mission.

Feral cats, she admits, can be fearful, aggressive, shy or all of the above. In fact, she was bitten twice shortly after beginning work at the cattery, prompting five rounds of antibiotic treatment.

"I started wearing bite-proof gloves after that," she says wryly.

Ferals gradually build some trust when you work with them daily, she says. "If you get them young enough, there's a good chance you can domesticate

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JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Mary Jarman Karr cuddles Bubba, whom Karr calls "a real lover." Bubba is one of dozens of cats — many of them feral — Karr brought back from New Orleans, where she helped rescue pets displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Seven of the cats have taken up at least temporary residence with Karr.

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With the nation's animal shelters full of healthy domestic cats needing homes, not all animal-welfare experts and veterinarians favor feral rescue, especially transporting them to a new state.

Dr. Terri Schneider, clinical instructor at Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine, says, "All of these cats deserve to be well cared for; they can't help where they were born and how they were displaced. "I would have concern, however, how they are integrated [elsewhere] because they may be carrying different strains of FIV [feline immunodeficiency virus] and FELV [feline leukemia virus]. You wouldn't want to see a New Orleans strain of either disease introduced here."

In New Orleans, the temporary shelter was given notice to close, as the school planned to reopen — giving Karr and other volunteers an urgent need for more permanent solutions.

Karr contacted Judy McCarthy, of Dandelion Dog Rescue in Forks, Clallam County, which has a feral-cat colony. McCarthy told MuttShack her shelter could accommodate several dozen feral cats if Karr could get them there.

How to transport 63 cats, more than half virtually wild, across the country? Just in time, the Humane Society of the United States donated a climate-controlled semi-truck, equipped with individual cages, to the MuttShack shelter and supplied a driver to bring the animals to Forks.

On the seven-day trip home, Karr and another volunteer, Sandra Holder, shared minivan driving duties behind the semi. And like the rest of her adventure, the journey was far from conventional, with early-morning and midnight work sessions to clean cages and feed the animals.

After helping deliver most of the cats to Dandelion in Forks, Karr returned home with seven cats who seemed largely domesticated, and two puppies, dachshund and Akita mixes. Karr also may keep one or two of the seven cats and plans to work with area no-kill animal-rescue agencies to place the others.

They include Trickster, a declawed 5-year-old orange-and-white male who sits up and waves his paws for attention; Bubba, a jowly 5-year-old male "who's a real lover"; and Charger, a small year-old feral who loves to position himself in an intimidating "charge" posture for what Karr calls his tough-guy look.

While enjoying the comfort of home again, Karr says the experience was a life-changing event: "It really taught me what's important in life." She plans to quit her job in the technology industry and become a veterinary technician —

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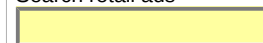
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and vows to remain involved in animal rescue ... "part of my character now."

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