

Ten Years Ago, “A Small Miracle Happened.”

By Kathy Downey

1992. Along Newburyport’s historic waterfront an elusive subcommunity struggled for survival. Creeping in the shadows along the wharfs and living in the shadows of humanity, families scrounged for food and sought shelter from the brutal elements of the weather and, sometimes, from the brutality of human nature. With no birth control, they kept propagating. The babies usually died. This was Newburyport’s “feral cat problem” before a small but dedicated and compassionate group of individuals intervened. Today, that group has grown immensely and evolved into a nationally recognized organization known as the *Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society*.

It all began with a letter to the Chamber of Commerce from Newburyport resident Jan DeWitt. Ten years ago on a frigid January morning, DeWitt was sipping coffee inside the Captain’s Quarters restaurant (now the Black Cow) when outside the window she saw three tiny, pathetic-looking kittens in a dumpster, searching for anything edible. Ultimately, Jan was able to rescue the helpless babies. They were clearly feral; that is, the kittens had no human imprinting on them, having been born to an abandoned cat or to a cat who was, like her babies, also born outside. Inherently wary of humans, feral cats rely on their innate wild instincts to stay alive. But it was obvious to DeWitt that these little ones, no matter how “scrappy” they were, would have succumbed to the tough winter along the riverfront had she chosen to return to her warm home and ignore their plight.

In fact, entire colonies of homeless cats and kittens – many of them sickly and near starvation – lived only a short stroll from the quaint storefronts and red-bricked sidewalks of downtown. DeWitt appealed to then Chamber President Shirley Magnanti, a cat-lover herself, for help rallying the local restaurateurs and downtown merchants to sponsor a humane solution. More letters followed in support of DeWitt’s proposal, including a letter from Newburyporter Dorothy Fairweather, another animal advocate with a passion for felines who would become the rescue society’s first president. DeWitt and Fairweather soon discovered that each had been busy rescuing homeless cats and kittens within a few miles of one another as a one-woman feline rescue operation.

Magnanti had also heard from visitors to the city who expressed their unwillingness to dine in restaurants where sickly cats competed with the harbor backdrop as a view. “The situation was bad for our image and not good for tourism,” Magnanti remembers. Then there were the boat owners who complained that, upon removing their tarps each spring, they would find the bodies of cats who had frozen during the winter months. So Magnanti told DeWitt and Fairweather to form a committee and she would formally present their cause to the Chamber. “Those were magic words,” recalls DeWitt. Adds Fairweather, “The support of the Chamber gave us legitimacy.” Without it, the women feared they’d have been dismissed as crazy cat ladies.

The two women strategized and recruited their cat-friendly friends and neighbors. Among them were Sheila Mullins and Nancy and Bob MacNeill, all of whom today remain devoted, active advocates for feral cats. The newly formed committee, known as the Newburyport Neuter and Release Program in those early days, set the group's charter to humanely capture, provide veterinary care that included spay/neuter, inoculation against rabies and distemper, and finally release of the treated cats into their established colonies where volunteers would care for them by providing food and shelter. Diseased cats would be euthanized.

While committee members were busy planning their first feline rescues as an organized group, Magnanti was able to garner the crucial support from the business community, particularly from the restaurateurs whose establishments lined the riverfront where most of the feral colonies lived. "It was a tough struggle," says Magnanti. "Some merchants did not want us to feed the cats; they preferred that we poison them." She says that they didn't understand the concept of *tnr* (trap, neuter, and return) and didn't understand that eradicating one colony would only "invite" another colony to claim the territory for whatever meager food source existed. A decade later, the effectiveness of *tnr* is realized in Newburyport's healthy, stable feral cat population.

The first veterinarian to join the group's cause, at Magnanti's invitation, was Dr. Regina Downey of Coastal Animal Clinic in Salisbury. She would donate the first 25 spay/neuters, but first she needed some patients. Downey didn't have to wait long; the feral cat team sprang into action! The group, joined by early volunteers Tracy Horridge and Ruth Mullaney, first took their mission to the city's boatyards and began in earnest the humane capture of these forgotten felines.

It may not have been exactly magic, but it was through teamwork, sweat, passion, and love for creatures who had found themselves sick and homeless through no fault of their own that gradually turned a dismal situation into a positive outcome. The group, now officially calling themselves (at Bob MacNeill's suggestion) the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society, would become a part of Newburyport's culture, along with the homeless cats they cared for. "All these good forces came together," says DeWitt, "Everyone gave. It was fabulous." Fairweather says simply, "A small miracle happened."

Something unexpected happened, too, but the outcome was no less miraculous. Not all the cats that the group trapped were truly feral. Some cats, while timid, were really very friendly and were clearly throwaway pets. Perhaps once accustomed to sleeping on a sofa, they were now forlorn strays sleeping beneath buildings in whatever crevice offered them rudimentary shelter. And then there were those cute and feisty feral kittens whose tenacity inspired these first volunteers, and melted their hearts. Society members made a unanimous decision. They would *not* release "friendly ferals" *or* feral kittens once the cats had been trapped and received their veterinary care. Instead, the group decided that these special cats should be fostered until permanent, loving homes could be found.

Nancy and Bob MacNeill are, unquestionably, the original "godparents" to countless friendly feral, semi-feral, almost feral, never feral, and sometimes truly feral cats and

kittens. With their family's blessing and support, the MacNeills opened their home and offered shelter, along with much love and attention, to Newburyport's wayward cats. Cages, cat carriers, and kitty playpens took over the floor space, and Nancy and Bob became round-the-clock caregivers. When asked why they did this, Nancy answers, "Somebody had to help them. The cats had no place else to go." Nancy says that many of the cats and kittens were sick and that she and Bob "nursed them through heaven and hell." Gummy would agree. Not expected to survive, Gummy was one of the MacNeill's first feral charges – who never left. Long since restored to health, Gummy is a friendly, personable and quirky cat who likes to perch on Nancy and Bob's shoulders. "He thinks he's a parakeet," Nancy says. Today, Nancy and Bob are the society's "master trappers," rescuing colonies of homeless cats throughout the seacoast area.

For nearly a year, the MacNeill household operated as the first MRFRS shelter. DeWitt volunteered for cage duty, arriving faithfully each day to clean the cages of the growing number of interim feline residents. When she wasn't scooping kitty litter at the MacNeill's, DeWitt was busy caring for a small colony of ferals who had made their home on the grounds of the recently renovated Towle building. Twice a day, each day of the year – no matter the weather, the holiday, or if she was feeling unwell – DeWitt brought her "babies" the breakfasts and dinners that she lovingly prepared for them, quite often steamed chicken.

Mullins, in the meantime, was honing her skills as a feral foster parent by helping out at the MacNeill household and socializing those tiny spitfire feral kittens, gradually gaining their trust. Mullins also manned the monthly cat food caravan to the Boston Food Bank when several volunteers, including Newburyport animal control officer Carol Laroque, would make the 80-mile roundtrip trek for cat food donations. "It was a labor-intensive, grueling effort," Mullins says. She remembers the physical strain of loading and unloading caseloads of food and then sorting through all the various cans, picking out the cans of tomato sauce and other non-cat food items, and discarding any cat food that had spoiled. Today, Sheila and her husband Jerry continue to make "food runs" on behalf of the society's feral cats. Some trekking and labor is still involved, but MRFRS now has a special feral cat food fund, and the Mullins are able to purchase the food locally. Sheila has also become an expert on feral cat socialization and hosted a recent "Feral Foster Forum" with feral foster home coordinator Patte Grimes. "Feral Fostering is *where it's at*," says Sheila.

Fairweather was another regular on those early food caravans, she was in the boatyards rescuing cats, and she was busy fostering any "overflow" from the MacNeill household. One memorable foster was a colony of 17 cats that Fairweather took in en masse, transforming her heated garage into a feral nursery. "After several months, it became obvious to us that we needed a more permanent shelter to house all these abandoned cats," says Fairweather. Through Fairweather's generosity and the opportune opening of rental space over Dr. Downey's newly opened clinic, the MRFRS found their current home on Bridge Road in Salisbury.

But it was literally just open space: exposed beams, no windows, no utilities ... just a floor and a ceiling. Volunteers contributed the labor and expertise to make it habitable for their first clients. Others donated appliances and cages. In December of 1993, the MRFRS no-kill shelter officially opened with a holiday open house and invited the community to come meet the cats, and perhaps adopt one or two.

Many cats later, the current population at the society's shelter is a mix of rescued strays, semi-ferals, ferals, and surrenders, all with distinct personalities and eccentricities. Each cat has his or her own story to tell and has won the heart of MRFRS caregivers.

One of our more notable shelter residents was Jaguar, a gorgeous white Persian who came to the shelter when he was already 11 years old after his guardian passed away. Prone to marking his territory (which he did with some delight), Jaguar stayed an MRFRS cat for the remainder of his life, becoming the shelter's mascot. In his last year, he went to live with one of the society's volunteers, where he was loved and spoiled until his death last summer at the age of 21.

Faith was another early shelter cat. Rescued from a field where she'd been abandoned, Faith had survived for months by catching rodents. When Faith was brought to the shelter, a society caregiver discovered that she'd been declawed. Although Faith took some time before she trusted humans again, after a couple of tries she found a guardian who met her approval.

Then there was Sammy D., a big gray tomcat who a volunteer found burrowing in a snow bank after the poor cat had been struck by a car. Grievously injured and terrified, the unclaimed stray boy spent a month's convalescence at Newbury Animal Hospital where he had the good fortune to be treated by Dr. John Grillo, one of our most dedicated, longtime vets. Not only did Dr. Grillo save Sammy D.'s life, he also neutered the gentle boy. Although he lost an eye, Sammy D. found himself in the lap of luxury with his new guardian, Joan Noonan of Amesbury, after a brief stay at our shelter.

Current president Stacy LeBaron continues to guide the MRFRS in its mission to help cats in need. Under LeBaron's leadership, the society has become a leading rescue organization known for its innovative and humane outreach programs. But it is a testament to the group's founders that Newburyport's "feral cat problem" has transformed itself into a humane program that has become a role model for other communities struggling with homeless cat populations. DeWitt, Fairweather, Mullins, Magnanti, and the MacNeills reflect quietly on their early struggles, and with a combination of humility and pride, they reflect also on their amazing accomplishment. Says Magnanti, "It was a true dedication." But most of all, the group reflects on the society's "first ferals."

They fondly remember Mickey, the MRFRS feral mascot who lived honorably in his boatyard for most of his 13+ years before joining his special caregiver in her home, where he was loved and pampered the last months of his life. They recall Captain Courageous, a worldly and personable orange tabby who looked after the other cats in his

colony until his death. The society's Captain Courageous Fund, which provides medical care to injured ferals, was established in the Captain's memory. Then there are those first ferals who continue to make their home in the city's boatyards and downtown locations: Clarence, Precious, Rachel, Cremora, Bruno, Posey, Big Boy, Big Guy, and Coastie, just to name a sampling. Coastie is perhaps the most famous. Several years ago the hardy Maine Coon found himself stranded at the river's edge, his paws frozen to an ice floe, until a kind-hearted Coast Guard officer rescued him.

Newburyport's enduring first ferals are all between 10 and 14 years old, thanks to the intervention of the MRFRS founders and the care provided by an incredible group of volunteers over the last decade. Each of these cats is, as Fairweather might say, a small miracle.

Word count: 2243

#