
THE STORY
BEHIND
THE FERAL CAT
CARETAKERS'
COALITION

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FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT

During the years of the Great Depression, my family lived in Lincoln, Nebraska. Out of financial necessity, my grandparents, who lived a few blocks from the University of Nebraska, converted their home into a boarding house for students. I lived, for the most part, with my grandmother and great grandmother. In Lincoln, as well as in other cities throughout the United States, it was a time when homeless and hungry people roamed the streets and neighborhoods. People would come to our door and beg for food in exchange for menial work. My great grandmother would prepare a plate of food, but she always had chores for them before eating.

The meals were consumed on the back steps, in all kinds of weather. Many times the men would appear with groups of dogs that were also hungry. There always seemed to be a shortage of food when it came to the dogs. The cats in the neighborhoods fared even worse. They were afraid to come close enough to eat as many had been abused and chased away. This was a very sad experience for me, especially when I witnessed the inhumane disposal of many kittens. The older cats were usually left to starve or scavenge for what little food was available for them. My great grandmother said there was not enough food for the people, let alone the animals.

I decided I could do something about the dogs, as they would come close enough for help. My great grandmother always made a lunch for me to take to school. In the mornings on my way to school I called the dogs and they would appear. We would go into the bushes where I would spread out my lunch on the ground. The ravenous dogs ate everything, including the apple and the waxed paper. It was never enough. After several weeks of not having lunch, the school phoned my Grandmother to see if she wanted to put me on the special lunch program. I was then forbidden to feed the dogs my lunch, so I took food from the refrigerator and the garbage. I managed to feed them a small amount each day. If I got caught, it would be hell to pay.

Those years were a sad time in my life and I became very introspective. I wondered what I could do to help and what was going to happen to everyone. My grandmother said that I worried too much. The events of those years, as well as the people and animals who experienced hunger and suffering, were vividly etched upon my young mind. Later in my life, I was able to reach into that special place in my heart and use it to help others.

During my stay with Aunt Faye in South Dakota, she began formally teaching me much about the sacredness of animal life. Several years later she moved to San Leandro, California for a new teaching assignment, and it was then that her long-term commitment to animal welfare took form. The schoolchildren brought her cats and kittens they found, and as a result, Aunt Faye began caring for large numbers of cats and kittens that were abandoned and homeless. She arranged for them to be spayed and neutered. They were also given whatever was available for their continued good health. Several puppies also found sanctuary, along with a few dogs.

Her home was large with a big garage. Groups of cats and kittens were placed in various locations, depending upon their immediate needs and personalities. Most lived indoors and Aunt Faye watched over them with compassion and dedication. The responsible and loving manner in which she cared for her cats, along with an occasional blind or handicapped dog, had an indelible effect upon me. She would explain to me in detail the many mysteries of caring for animals and I was always fascinated by her knowledge and stories.

By the time she retired and moved to Lake Havasu City, Arizona, she had 56 cats and 10 dogs. Quite remarkable, considering she had found homes for hundreds of animals during her 50 years of teaching school. She arranged them for transport in a house trailer and they moved to their new home. A large sunny room attached to the house was specifically built for them. Each cat had its own bed. The outdoor arrangement was coyote-proof and beautiful to behold, especially if you were a cat. Her life revolved around her animals and she made no excuses for this. They were her beloved ones. If any derogatory comments were made, it was rarely to her face. She was a fearless and strong individual who knew that what she was doing was right and honorable.

One day in April 1997, while attending a class at a large industrial park in Los Angeles, California, my life opened into world that had profound implications. It was raining hard and I had to park my car a considerable distance from the entrance of the building where the class was being held. The building was still under construction and this was to be our only visit until its completion in December. Our teacher wanted the class to see the progress that had been made and also to experience our new location.

As I pulled into the parking space, a sight I had never imagined came into view in the form of starving, soaked, and debilitated cats and kittens. Mothers were attempting to nurse their young on the rain soaked asphalt with cars and trucks racing by, splashing water over and over onto their little bodies. Mud and grime covered the area that vegetation had once covered. Cats were sitting in the mud or seeking shelter from the rain by staying under the cars. There were about 30 in view. I sat in my car, frozen in the moment, overwhelmed by feelings of sadness, helplessness and anger. The realization of their suffering and struggle for survival deeply touched a familiar place within me and my life was forever changed. Sitting there in the car seeing lives so precious and fragile that they could pass without help, I was moved to a place, so profoundly personal, it cannot be described. I knew my purpose. The awe and gratitude for knowing this never leaves me. I draw upon that memory in times of great need and stress, always receiving reaffirmation of why I am here.

Much of my professional life involved working with prominent physicians and surgeons in administrative and management capacities. During the 30 years that I worked with patients who were ill or having surgery, and perhaps facing terminal illness, I understood the importance of compassion,

patience, dedication and responsibility. However, I did not realize at the time how the experiences of my profession would become so vital in my caring for feral cats and kittens.

During the course of becoming a feral cat caretaker I dedicated myself to understanding and learning just what that means. The task was fraught with heartache and required great endurance and commitment. I had taken on the care and responsibility of approximately 100 plus cats and kittens scattered over a very large area with no population control. Over the years, the management of the property and tenants had disposed of numerous cats and kittens in a most inhumane manner. My deep concern was met with overt hostility and I was ordered not to feed them. Not one to be easily intimidated and knowing what I was doing was right and humane, I persevered. I continued feeding them and began trapping, spaying, neutering and vaccinating the cats and quietly returning them. I endured threats of all kinds, including continual destruction of feeding areas along with removal and disposal of the equipment I had purchased. I clearly remember that particular day while being threatened from all sides, standing by my car with a bag of food and sobbing my eyes out at the absolute injustice of what was taking place, the vision for the Feral Cat Caretakers' Coalition began to take form.

I understood, first hand, how important it was to educate the public, caretakers, community and civic leaders or anyone who might come into contact with a feral cat or kitten. I started by writing informative letters and creating educational documents to address the circumstances. I sent them to the property manager as the situation was so emotionally charged that face-to-face communication was useless. I continued doing my caretaking. Gradually, a transformation took place. Most of the cats were spayed or neutered. Whenever possible, kittens were taken from the area and adopted. The population was managed and healthy. All of the feeding and water containers remained untouched. The cats were thriving and none were being harmed. People began coming up to me with donations. I was being told how wonderfully conditions had changed under my care. The impossible situation had turned to respect and appreciation. For me, it was a miracle.

The urgent need for support of the feral cat caretakers in this arduous and faithful work became all too clear. They are generally unsupported and unrecognized due to a gross lack of interest and commitment from the community at large. I envision the Feral Cat Caretakers' Coalition as a group of unified, trained and dedicated individuals who could look toward a brighter future with their heads held high and their needs met. As the caretakers continue to learn and implement humane population control measures for feral cats and kittens, they will be making an important statement that will



impact our society in countless positive ways for years to come.

As we enter the 21st Century, the streets are once again overflowing with abandoned, forgotten and ignored homeless cats, dogs and humans. Many homeless persons feed and care for the homeless cats and dogs from their meager fare, under the most challenging conditions.

I believe that we can grow and work together for the enrichment of one another and those we touch. Each life saved and nurtured can move us closer to an awareness of the significance of our contribution. Maybe someday, in the not too distant future, we can all experience what it means to care for and respect one another. It could begin with a feral cat or kitten.

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