

PHOTO COURTESY OF SEER FARMS

Casey, an FIV-positive cat, at Seer Farms

the *things* we do for (*cat*) love

*these feline
lovers prove
there's nothing
crazy about
kindness*

They never expected to fall in love. They thought, "I'll just TNR (trap/neuter/return) these cats and feed them." But next thing they knew, they were buying fancy winterized shelters, risking their lives to feed the colony during a hurricane, or even building a 1,000-square-foot house just for rescued cats.

Some might think it's crazy to go to such lengths for cats who can't even be touched. But we've found some exceptionally innovative community cat caregivers who prove that there's nothing crazy about kindness. Their love for feral cats has motivated them to do extraordinary things to protect, enrich and improve the lives of these once-overlooked animals. Once you see the difference it's made, maybe you will be inspired to open your heart to community cats and put your love into action.



(**down on the** *farm*)

The spectacular indoor/outdoor cat habitats that ring the old New Jersey farmhouse and its outbuildings weren't part of the original plan for the Seer Farms animal sanctuary. In fact, community cats weren't part of the plan at all. But that all changed when the group's founder and executive director, Laura Pople, first drove out to see the property and saw dozens of little cat faces peering back at her in the woods.

The property owner fed more than 40 cats and kittens, but hadn't spayed or neutered them before he passed away. "Those cats made the land feel like it had the karma we wanted for our sanctuary, and we ended up purchasing the property," says Laura, who started a TNR program right away.

Wanting to provide a safe and fulfilling environment for the cats, they built luxury indoor/outdoor habitats. The enclosures feature slides, suspended cat tunnels, perches and lots of cozy bedding. There are trees for them to climb, leaves to chase, heated indoor accommodations and volunteers to help entertain the cats. There's even one habitat just for cats with FIV, feline immunodeficiency virus, which can weaken a cat's immune system.

"Our primary mission is to provide temporary care to the animals of families that are going through crisis," Laura explains. "But we love these ferals, and you can tell they appreciate it. It feels so good to be able to do something extraordinary for these cats, to give them a safe place to live in a comfortable and natural space, and to be able to provide for them for the rest of their lives."



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF SEER FARMS

"Those cats made the land feel like it had the karma we wanted for our sanctuary."
 ~ Laura Pople

TOP: Cats at Seer Farms enjoy access to indoor/outdoor habitats.

MIDDLE: Yankee at Seer Farms

BOTTOM: Laura Pople with Spooky



ALL PHOTOS BY KEN SALERNO



Nearly 100 community cats live under the boardwalk in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. Volunteers for Seaside Heights Animal Welfare Group have helped care for the cats in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, a boardwalk fire and several severe winter storms.

“We do this because these animals are like family to us and we will do anything we can to help them, no matter what.”

~ Ruth Drake

(under the boardwalk)

In Seaside Heights, New Jersey, just the act of feeding community cats can be an incredible feat. In the past two years, the volunteers of

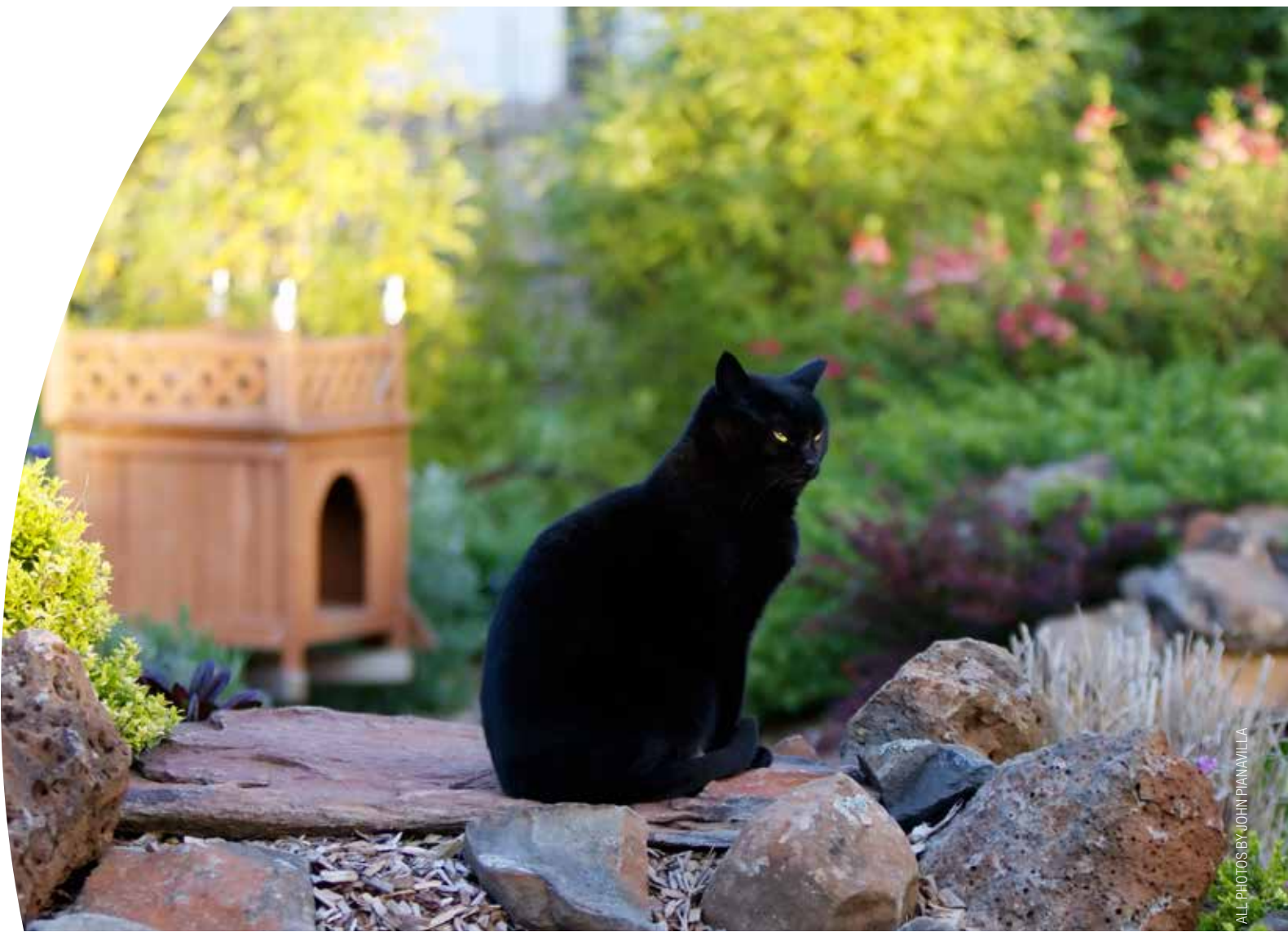
Seaside Heights Animal Welfare Group have had to brave Superstorm Sandy’s destructive floodwaters, a boardwalk fire and arctic snowstorms to take care of nearly 100 community cats who live under the boardwalk.

“During Hurricane Sandy, I was so worried that they wouldn’t make it. But one of our volunteers saw the matriarch of the colony leading all the cats up the street as the floodwaters were rising. We were so relieved she led them to safety,” says Ruth Drake, who volunteers for the group. The cats survived, but everything they had come to rely on was destroyed: feeding stations, shelters, even the boardwalk.

Because of the debris, the area was off-limits to everyone but construction crews. So every day for several months, Ruth had to plead her case to state troopers to let her through to feed the cats. As the boardwalk and the town were reconstructed, the volunteers also rebuilt feeding stations and shelters while continuing to neuter cats.

“These cats bond and really care about each other. When we got some of the cats fixed and brought them back, the colony matriarch walked right up and rubbed against my leg as if to say, ‘Thank you for helping these guys.’ It was the most amazing experience,” Ruth says, pausing to suppress tears. “This work is a labor of love. We do this because these animals are like family to us, and we will do anything we can to help them, no matter what.”





ALL PHOTOS BY JOHN PIANAVILLA

John Pianavilla took in two feral cats, Cinder and Oscar, from Project Purr and built an elaborate haven for them, complete with shelters, warming stones and a catnip garden.

"We give community cats a 'get-out-of-jail-free card' and help them go from paupers to princes."

~ Lynne Achterberg

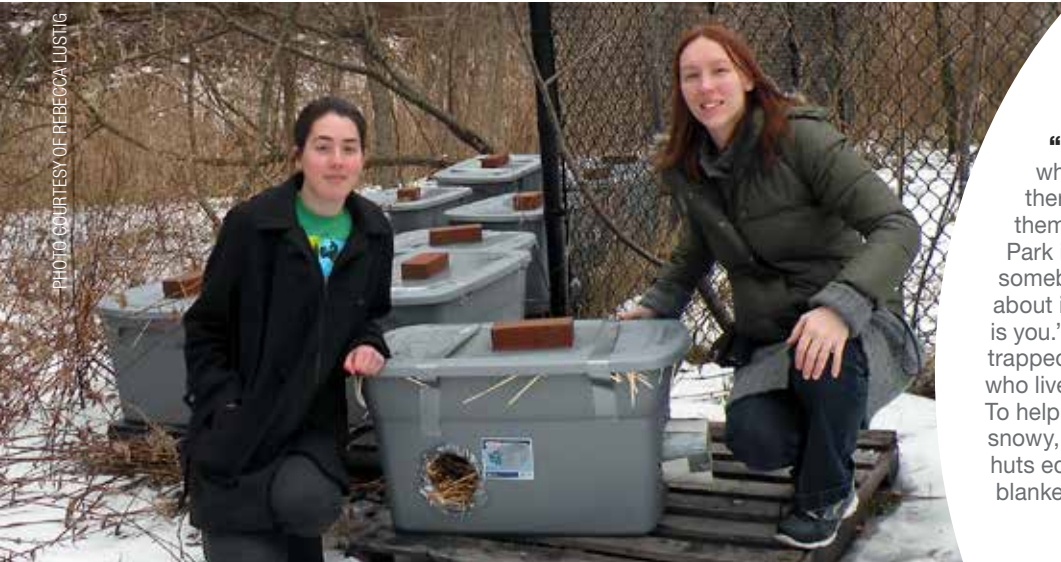


PHOTO COURTESY OF REBECCA LUSTIG

Someone to watch over me

"It hits you on a visceral level when you see community cats out there without anyone to look after them," says Rebecca Lustig of Clifton Park in upstate New York. "You think somebody should be doing something about it, and then you realize that person is you." She and Carol Kosloski have trapped, neutered and returned 14 cats who live around an apartment complex. To help keep them warm during the snowy, frigid winter, they constructed huts equipped with straw and Mylar blankets for bedding.



(**a whole new world**)

“Young or old, feral or social — all cats matter. They all deserve to live, and live well.”

says Lynne Achterberg of Project Purr in Santa Cruz, California. She saves feral cats who are slated to be killed at her local shelter. After spaying or neutering them, she finds homes for them on organic farms or resorts overlooking the sparkling Pacific Ocean, and in red-wood-studded gardens throughout her coastal community. She says, “We give community cats a ‘get-out-of-jail-free card’ and help them go from paupers to princes.”

Going from the shelter to such idyllic locations is a relief for the cats. “It’s a new world for them,” Lynne says. “When they’re at the shelter, they’re frightened and confused, so they’re very withdrawn. Once we get them back out into the fresh air in their acclimation hutches (which help them acclimate to their new surroundings), and give them warm, comfy bedding and love, they start to bloom.”

So far, Project Purr has successfully saved and placed more than 300 cats. The residents who adopt these felines love them, regardless of whether the cats can be touched. Some even go to special lengths to please them. Like John Pianavilla, a contractor who created a spectacular park-like haven for two Project Purr alumni: Oscar and Cinder. For the cats, he built a feline version of the Golden Gate Bridge, a customized arbor, shelters and even a catnip garden. “It’s all about the cats,” says John, laughing. “I really love cats; they all deserve the best.”

Some of the relocated felines do so well that they actually end up indoors and find a place for themselves on the laps of their new people. “You just can’t get a good read on a cat’s sociability at a shelter, but you can really see their personalities unfold when they’re comfortable and happy again,” Lynne says. “Those that are shy also blossom in their own ways. It’s so great to see them all alive and thriving in their new outdoor homes. I love what we do.”



Happy together

“I had a little bit of money for Christmas and instead of spending it all on other people or myself, I decided to buy a Christmas gift for the kitties who live on our porch,” says Larissa Dolen of Sacramento, California. So she purchased a posh, insulated cat house. The cats, Sterling and Nutmeg, snuggle up in it together every night. “My boyfriend thinks I’m nuts, but whatever,” Larissa says with a laugh.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LARISSA DOLEN



“The cats are a lot happier after they have been spayed or neutered, treated for fleas, de-wormed and vaccinated. It makes a big difference in their lives.”

~ Laura Zapico



ABOVE: Andy Kwong converted a storage room in his backyard into a special retreat for Mom Cat (tuxedo) and her kittens, Cookie and Milu.

BELOW: Once per month, Feral Cat Coalition of San Diego sets up an outdoor clinic to spay and neuter cats.

(time after time)

What do you do when you want to hold a mass spay/

neuter clinic for 75-150 community cats at a time, but you don't have a location to accommodate that many cages? If you're as industrious as the volunteers at Feral Cat Coalition of San Diego, you create a pop-up outdoor clinic. Once per month, they set up tarp-walled rooms behind a veterinary hospital, and then bring in supplies, volunteer veterinarians and staff to spay or neuter and vaccinate community cats. Since 1992, they've sterilized 40,000 felines. (That's not a typo — 40,000!)

“You do what you have to do,” says Laura Zapico, Feral Cat Coalition's clinic reservations coordinator. “The cats are a lot happier after they have been spayed or neutered, treated for fleas, de-wormed and vaccinated. It makes a big difference in their lives.”

One of the local caregivers who has taken advantage of their services is Andy Kwong. With the help of Feral Cat Coalition, he trapped and fixed a mom cat and her kittens who showed up in his backyard about a year ago. He fell so head over heels for them that he converted a storage room adjacent to his backyard into a special retreat for the furry family.

“It's quite magical to see how they've changed,” Andy says. “Last year, they were really feral. But now they have a comfortable place to stay, freedom to run around; they don't have to worry about food or water and they're happy. Now they're very affectionate and let me pet them. They're really cute.”

It's a transformation that Laura sees time after time. She says, “After feral cats have been spayed or neutered, a lot of times they bond with other cats and with their caregivers. It's like they finally get to relax and just be happy cats.”



ALL PHOTOS BY ANDY KWONG



Nancy Dischler spends time with some of the 30-plus community cats who live in the studio she and her husband built.

(*just the way you are*)

There's a secret utopia for community cats hidden in the foothills of South Carolina's

Blue Ridge Mountains. Nestled in the woods of Spartanburg sits a house specifically built for feral felines who wouldn't be alive if it weren't for this special place. Rescued from precarious situations, the 33 cats who live in this studio now play on cat trees, lounge outside in the sun while watching deer pass by, and enjoy the view from hammocks strung on their custom-built kitty tower.

Nancy Dischler and her husband built the studio for community cats who need a place to recover from injury and illness, and

for displaced shy cats to live. "The cats' lives have value and I love them just the way they are. It's important to care for others beyond ourselves," Nancy says. Each cat in the studio has a story, such as the two who lived in a busy parking lot and surely would have died if left there. Or

the six who lived behind a McDonald's. Nancy had them fixed and was caring for them, but the cats were about to be trapped and killed by someone who didn't want them there anymore.

"Her place is incredible. It's immaculate," says Major Steve Lamb, who heads up Spartanburg Animal Services. "It's unbelievably organized, like a professional animal shelter. Miss Nancy has heating and air-conditioning for them, litter boxes hidden behind cabinet doors, a fully fenced yard to protect them. It's really amazing. She is really amazing."

Nancy has paid for all of this, plus the cats' ongoing care, out of her retirement savings — a cost of tens of thousands of dollars. She

and fellow cat advocate Robin Hester recently started a rescue group called Alley Cat Orphans, with the hope that others will support their lifesaving efforts. Nancy says, "I want to make sure that these cats know that they matter, that someone cares about them."

Not too far from the community cat studio is a separate enclosure with what looks like an oversized fairytale birdhouse inside. Several fur balls reach down from the attic to play footsy with kittens on the lower levels. It's a home-between-homes for rescued kittens and for mom cats who are nursing their babies.

Nancy adopts them out as quickly as possible to make room for more in need. "Someone needs to care for them and help them, and that's me," she says. "Anything I can do to help feral cats is what I will do for the rest of my life." 🐾



To learn more about TNR or about how you can help community cats in your area:
felines.bestfriends.org