

# The Power of One

How individuals help drive the no-kill movement

BY LIZ FINCH



Wendy Johnson with Farkle

PHOTO COURTESY OF TOUCH OF GREY RESCUE



Jamie-Sue West traps cats in Lahaina, Hawaii.



Mackenzie with Angela Rafuse

**B**EST FRIENDS HAS LONG CHAMPIONED the power of individual action in animal welfare. After all, the organization was founded by a group of passionate advocates who believed that even one person could make a difference. That philosophy propelled the organization to become a leader in the movement, working toward ending the killing of animals in shelters and achieving no-kill nationwide in 2025.

At their best, shelters are a resource in their communities for truly homeless pets. The public is an important part of the solution as well — from choosing adoption to supporting their local shelter and everything in between. Keeping pets out of shelters who don't truly need those resources is critical too and something unsung heroes around the country do every day. Whether your passion is newborn kittens or senior dogs, there's always a need for more helping hands.

### COMMUNITY CAT CARE: A GRASSROOTS EFFORT

John Elam of Phoenix, Arizona, started helping animals 20 years ago when he spotted some cats living behind a fast-food restaurant. Concerned about their well-being, he and his wife began a nightly feeding routine for those cats and another group living in a nearby lumberyard. John lost his wife a few years ago, but he keeps up their ritual — even though he turned 89 this past summer.

"I've been doing this for a long time and hopefully the Good Lord will keep me around to do more," John says. The cats know him so well that they come running out to greet him at the sound of his car.

In Desert Hot Springs, California, Margie Flores found herself in a similar situation caring for cats who didn't belong to her. "I

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~ Margie Flores, community cat caregiver

wanted one or two little cats, that was all. But people kept moving out and leaving their cats behind," she says. "At one time there were 29, though I'm down to 21 now. Some people think I'm the crazy cat lady, but I'm just a normal person who was put in this position. I won't turn my back on animals for any reason."

John and Margie's willingness to care for cats has undoubtedly saved and improved the lives of many felines. And while they are clearly happy to help, they can't do it alone.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NEIGHBORHOOD CATS



John Elam feeds community cats.

PHOTO BY LIZ FINCH

That's where organizations like the Phoenix-based Foundation for Homeless Cats come in, introducing caregivers like John to the concept of trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR). By partnering with these organizations, individuals looking to make a difference can transform their compassionate feeding efforts into sustainable population management.

"If it weren't for people like Carla Jewell, who founded Foundation for Homeless Cats, it would be very difficult for these kitties," says John, who is not able to take on the physical labor of trapping. "She should have a gold star on her head for what she does for the cats."

Margie, who is 70, lacks a car and is on a fixed income, also doesn't have the resources to do TNVR by herself. She receives assistance from individuals in her community who, like Margie, do the work on their own, apart from any formal organization.

For both Margie and John, the challenge of taking care of free-roaming cats in their neighborhoods is ongoing, especially when new cats show up. Without TNVR efforts curbing the flow of kittens, however, they know things could be much worse. "It's a never-ending battle, but somebody has to do it," Margie says. "I'm not going to turn my back on the cats."

## STEPPING FORWARD TO MEET A NEED

Many individuals get involved in helping pets to fill gaps in their community's resources. That's what Wendy Johnson did in Florida when she founded Touch of Grey Rescue. "I have never enjoyed visiting shelters. But I visited one in the area and realized how many older dogs and dogs needing medical care were just sitting

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~ Angela Rafuse, My Grandfather's Cat founder

in shelters," says Wendy, whose organization now boasts 50 to 60 volunteers and cares for dozens of dogs at a time. "That shelter didn't have adequate resources to care for these dogs and there was no local rescue group doing it."

Similarly, Nova Scotia resident Angela Rafuse was motivated to start the charity My Grandfather's Cat when she realized there were no resources in her area that helped senior pets — or senior people who had older pets. "I started the organization after my grandfather died in December 2019, and the name is a reference to his cat, Mackenzie," Angela explains. "She was a grumpy, hissy senior cat and I just couldn't think about her being in a shelter."



Mackenzie with Angela's grandfather

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANGELA RAFUSE

Instead, Mackenzie moved in with Angela, who discovered that she was "the sweetest cat ever." Angela began posting videos of Mackenzie on TikTok and they went viral. "I was just posting for fun, then all these comments flooded in. I realized there was a tremendous need to help senior cats whose person had passed away or gone into a nursing home," she says. "Though Mackenzie was lucky there was a family member who could take her, many people don't have that option."

My Grandfather's Cat primarily helps seniors who can't take their pets with them into retirement homes. The organization also places pets into foster or adoptive homes when their person dies and there's no family to take the pet. So far, My Grandfather's Cat has facilitated 230 adoptions, attracted hundreds of thousands of followers on social media and built a community that includes 40 volunteers.

## MOBILIZING FOR EMERGENCY ANIMAL RESCUE

Natural disasters pose unique challenges for animal welfare, often requiring rapid mobilization of volunteers. When wildfires devastated Lahaina, Hawaii, in 2023, Maui Humane Society and the TNVR organization Neighborhood Cats (NC) shifted into high gear to save any pets who might still be alive in the burn zone. But first, the organizations had to convince government officials that some animals had survived.

"Many people didn't believe any pets could have made it through the fires, but we knew that wasn't true," says Bryan Kottis, NC's co-founder. "We know cats. They're very savvy. There had to be some still surviving within the rubble." As it turns out, lots of animals — 98% of whom were cats — were living in the fire zone and struggling to get by. A few other species were in the mix: a tortoise, a chicken, some pigs and several dogs.

"We spent around six months on the project, setting up wildlife



Bryan Kortis gives water to cats affected by the Hawaii wildfires.

**“We spent around six months on the project, setting up wildlife cameras to find out where the cats were hiding and then humanely trapping them.”**

~ Bryan Kortis, Neighborhood Cats co-founder

cameras to find out where the cats were hiding and then humanely trapping them,” Bryan explains. “By the end of the project, Neighborhood Cats had trapped 617 cats, which were a mixture of community cats and pets. During the first week of the project, Maui Humane Society’s humane law enforcement officers and Animal Search & Rescue personnel came in, too. The final number of cats rescued was 793.”

One volunteer who raised her hand to help is Jamie-Sue West. She had fostered close to 150 dogs for Maui Humane Society and was doing social media for the shelter after the fires. Though she knew practically nothing about trapping cats and had never worked in a disaster zone, Jamie-Sue was more than willing to get dirty if it meant saving lives.

“Seeing the destruction up close was surreal. You couldn’t even tell what color many of the cats were because they were covered in ash,” says Jamie-Sue, who didn’t enter the burn zone until several months after the fires. “By then, pet owners had been hearing officials say there was nothing left alive, so they had no reason for hope. But we saw cats on the cameras who were fat and healthy. We knew they were probably someone’s cat.”

Though the work was physically and emotionally tough, there were many bright spots. Jamie-Sue says her best day was when they finally trapped one particular cat — who they named Tinkerbelle because she had a bell on her collar. “I constantly checked the cats against the lost-pet flyers residents had made, and someone on the team found one that was made by Tinkerbelle’s person,” she says. “The woman was sure her cat had died. To be able to call her and tell her that her cat was safe was a profound experience. We all cried when they were reunited.”

Her experience also exposed Jamie-Sue to the importance of persevering even in devastating circumstances. “We kept telling people not to give up,” she says. “Don’t give up hope.”

## THE COLLECTIVE POWER OF INDIVIDUAL ACTION

These diverse efforts in community cat care, specialized rescue and disaster response all highlight the significant impact made by every person who gets involved in helping animals. “Individuals underestimate how much they can do,” says Wendy. “When I founded Touch of Grey Rescue, I figured I’d save 3 dogs per year. We ended up saving 86 in our first year, and have rescued 520 as of this summer.”

Getting involved doesn’t have to mean going into a shelter or fostering kittens, which is often difficult for people. “Every action contributes to the larger goal of creating a more humane society for animals, no matter how big or how small,” says Jamie-Sue.

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~ Jamie-Sue West, Neighborhood Cats volunteer

“Not strong enough to walk a dog or allergic to cats? How about doing laundry? It’s crazy how much laundry can pile up. Even sitting in a kennel and reading to a shy or stressed animal can be enough. Your presence is enough.”

For those who choose to do more hands-on work, bright spots like Tinkerbelle’s reunion with her person help offset the hard days. “Even with our hospice dogs, it’s not sad for us,” says Wendy. “Whether it’s a day, a week or a month, these dogs get to have a couple of cheeseburgers and a comfy bed in a warm home. These are our companions and if we can give them some kindness even at the end of their lives, shouldn’t we all be doing that?” 🐾