



HobokenPatch

VOLUNTEERS IN THE NEWS

A Good Deal for Senior Cat Lovers

Eileen Brennan shares her experience with the Senior Citizens Foster/Adopting Program of the Hudson County Animal League, where local senior citizens provide foster homes for elderly cats and both parties enjoy warm companionship.

By **Kathleen O'Malley** March 5, 2010

In 2008, Eileen Brennan, a Bayonne resident in her late 70s, had just gotten out of the hospital and lost her two elderly cats. A lifelong cat lover, she was devastated. But between her recuperation from knee surgery and hospital expenses, the idea of going out and getting a new cat seemed a tall order.

Then Brennan's friend Lorma Wepner, a board member of the Hudson County Animal League (HCAL), approached her with a perfect solution: would she consider fostering an elderly cat named Luba?

Luba was sick, but HCAL would pay for veterinary bills, provide transportation and even supply food and litter. Brennan agreed to meet the little 10-year-old gray cat to see how they'd get along. "They brought her to my house and put her next to me," she said. "Luba put out her paw and touched my arm—I've never met a cat who did that. That was it; I said OK, you win. I just fell in love with her."

So the two senior citizens began a wonderful life together, which lasted until Luba's recent passing.

Wepner's solution for Brennan and Luba was no fluke. It was the start of a countywide HCAL initiative called the Senior Citizens Foster/Adopting Program, which Wepner chairs. The idea is brilliantly simple: local senior citizens provide foster homes for elderly cats, both parties enjoy companionship, and HCAL picks up any bills that the foster owners can't afford.

HCAL is a state-approved adoption agency that holds regular adoption events in Hoboken during street festivals and has placed many pets in Hoboken homes. They don't have a shelter, so all of the animals they rescue are kept as fosters in the homes of HCAL volunteers until they are adopted.

Most people who are ready to adopt a pet prefer young animals, which makes it harder to find a permanent home for older pets. HCAL takes in many homeless elderly pets each year, mainly cats. They are usually left behind when their elderly owner dies or moves.

One of the ways HCAL tries to promote the adoption of an elderly pet is through a flyer that reads: "This loving companion can give a senior unconditional love, give you a new purpose in life and can fill your life and your pet's life with so much joy!"

The "age appropriateness" of the animals has helped to make the program a success. A senior herself, Wepner appreciates the gentle, mellow nature of older pets and has taken in two Senior Program cats, Cole and Rascal (Luba's brother).

"An older cat is wonderful," Brennan said. "I think they're great. I didn't want to raise a kitten anymore and I didn't want a cat with bad habits."

Some seniors end up leaving the program, but for the best reason of all. "Most seniors that can afford pets adopt ours," Wepner said.

The fact that senior cats will die sooner than younger cats doesn't phase the program's participants. The advantages of an older cat's company outweigh the inevitable sadness that comes in the end. In Brennan's case, she knew Luba had cancer, "but I didn't care. She was a special little old cat. There was just something about her."

Despite Luba's illness, Brennan's care seemed to give her a new lease on life. She came to Brennan with missing patches of fur and generally looking unwell. After two or three months, though, Brennan found that, "she started looking good, even healthy. Her fur grew back."

Brennan credits HCAL for the extensive support they provided in Luba's care. "Vet bills can kill you. But it didn't cost me a penny," she said. "It was a pretty good deal." Brennan was especially grateful to HCAL president Charlene Devaney for transporting Luba to frequent vet visits during her cancer treatment. "That woman knocked herself out for me. She was there for [Luba]."

Another generous local group, the Metro Cheer All Star Cheerleaders, donates cat food to HCAL Senior Program participants who can't afford it. Metro Cheer is a Bayonne-based group of competitive cheerleaders from local grade schools and high schools. They hold regular food drives for HCAL.

One economic barrier for many seniors who want to have pets is the one-time \$300 security fee levied by Hudson County-owned senior housing. Like many landlords, the county is protecting itself against the possibility of pets damaging its property. HCAL can't cover this fee for its senior volunteers, although Wepner said she is working with the county Office on Aging to make it more manageable. She has proposed a payment plan of \$10 a month for seniors who can't afford to pay the entire \$300 up front.



The program is in constant need of volunteers. Potential adopters may try a pet out from three weeks to nine weeks. After that, the pet will be eligible for adoption or continued fostering.

If you and/or someone you know are a senior citizen interested in the program, please contact Lorma Wepner, Chairperson, at 201-437-7263 or LormaLady@aol.com. For more information about HCAL and its other programs, visit www.hcalnj.org.



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