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Volunteers battle the proliferation of feral cats on Long Island

By Matthew Bevilacqua



Janette Pellegrini/Herald

MaryAnne Cestaro, left, and Joanne Monez do all they can to collect and spay or neuter feral cats. Monez works with All About Spay Neuter Inc.

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Five kittens and their mother live in a spacious cage in MaryAnne Cestaro's homey Franklin Square garage. The little ones are 4 weeks old and just opening their eyes and learning to walk.

Naturally, the mother, Grace, is protective of her offspring, but in this case her behavior is exceptional. When humans approach, her eyes widen and her body begins to shake violently.

Grace and her kittens are feral cats — cats born and raised outside, without owners to tame them (in contrast to stray cats, which begin life in a home but, for one reason or another, wind up outside, fending for themselves). Feral cats can roam the streets as loners or gather in colonies, hiding out in the nooks of suburbia. While they try to avoid contact with humans, they frequently rely on people who, knowingly or not, provide them with food.

And around here, there are thousands of them.

"Most people are not aware of the enormous problem here on Long Island," said Joanne Monez of All About Spay Neuter Inc., a nonprofit that focuses on alleviating feral cat overpopulation through the trap/neuter/return, or TNR, method. It involves baiting the cats into gravity-driven "humane" traps that can be manufactured products, like those made by the popular company Tru-Catch, or homemade cardboard apparatuses, which Monez compared to something out of "The Little Rascals," with safeguards preventing harm to the captured animals.

"We collect as many as we can that day and bring them to the recovery center, holding over 50 cats," said Monez. "We keep going back to the same location until all the cats [in the area] are trapped.

"That's the only way to cut down on the feral cat population," she added.

Once captured, the mother cats are spayed and re-released after three to five days. Before a cat is released, the tip of its left ear is clipped for future identification. "When you see a cat that has the left ear tipped, that's a cat that has been spay neutered," said Monez. The operation frees the mother from the burden of further pregnancies and minimizes the chances that it will develop an infection of the uterus. It also helps control an already overwhelming feral population. "Those stray cats, feral cats — they must be fixed," said Cestaro. "There

are no ifs, ands or buts about it.”

“They calm down,” Monez said of the cats’ post-operative behavior. “They’re not as wild. You’re really doing a service for them, getting them fixed.” She claimed that after seeing the same cat before and after a spaying or neutering, she can detect a noticeable improvement in its appearance, gait, demeanor and even the quality of its fur.

Monez and Cestaro, who volunteers at the North Shore Animal League, dedicate much of their spare time to seeing to this process over and over. They met through their work with cats, but both have a history of caring for various animals in need. Cestaro once rescued a dog caught in the middle of Hempstead Turnpike, and Monez once took in a swan stranded on the road.

Cestaro, who, prior to looking after nine outdoor cats at her former Bayside home, had little knowledge of the issue, soon fell into the routine of going back to Queens and Manhattan to carry out TNR. Since she moved to Franklin Square five years ago, she has often run into neighbors who know of or feed feral colonies in the neighborhood, and she offers them advice on proper care and the necessity of getting the cats fixed.

She had to wipe her eyes while recalling one blind kitten, named Jade, that she cared for for six months, but eventually had to euthanize. But Jade enjoyed protection, three meals a day and the comfort of relative domesticity. “It feels really good to do this,” Cestaro said. Monez, the de facto go-to TNR expert in the area, first became aware of feral and stray cats while living near a restaurant. The employees regularly fed a group of them that hung around out back. She grew interested, and in 2004 began her volunteer work. Since then, she has captured and released an estimated 4,600 cats across Nassau County, Queens and Brooklyn. Monez and a partner handle on average about 900 cases a year, and have the results to prove it: Untreated feral cats have essentially disappeared from Belmont Park in the past two years. She hasn’t heard of a new feral cat popping up in Jones Beach since she worked that area in 2005.

Her other tasks include advising citizens about TNR and lobbying local government officials to implement agendas addressing the situation. Just this year the Town of Hempstead started a program in which any resident can bring in two to four cats each week for a spaying or neutering, mimicking a policy on the books in Oyster Bay for two years now. “But that’s not helping,” Monez said. “They need to be taking 20 to 30 cats a week.”

To put the problem in perspective, consider how one female cat can, over the course of seven years — accounting for grand-kittens and incest (common among feral cats) — produce more than 4,000 descendants. Monez once trapped an 8-month-old female in Brooklyn that had nine kittens.

She would like to see a program like the more than 100 once-a-month spay neuter centers in Manhattan. Her organization has worked with the ASPCA in New York City with great success, but the latter nonprofit only covers the five boroughs.

Nassau and Suffolk counties have so far been slow to adopt effective policies to deal with feral cats, according to Monez. One issue is that many programs, such as that just put into practice in Hempstead, require residents to take the initiative in getting cats to recovery centers for neutering. “I just met a woman in Massapequa who’s 78 years old,” said Monez. “She can’t bring in the cats herself.” Other citizens might not know about how imperative neutering is. While leaving out food seems compassionate and generous, it can actually amplify the problem, since it will only encourage further breeding. “There’s just so few people out there really doing it,” said Monez, referring to the process of TNR. Any other approach, she said, can lead to euthanasia at the hands of a careless or overburdened shelter or vet.

“If you’re going to feed the cat,” she said, “you have to follow through.”

“And you don’t have to be a cat lover,” Cestaro added.

To contact All About Spay Neuter Inc., visit www.AllAboutSpayNeuter.com or e-mail AllAbtSpayNeuter@aol.com. To contact Alley Cat Allies, a closely related organization for feral cats, visit www.alleycat.org.

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