

Sunday Column – It Takes a Village
For publication 2.4.18

Free-roaming cats are plentiful in the Southeastern United States. The warm climate and lush environment combine to encourage their procreative inclinations. More litters are born in our region, and more kittens survive, increasing the size of existing colonies to match available resources.

Those humans who are unable to resist the call of service to our feline friends find themselves wholly outnumbered. It must be overwhelming and I imagine these folks would benefit from the advice of Mother Teresa who once said, “If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one.”

I love the story of a particular cat colony, with an estimated 50 residents, inhabiting a field in Columbus, Georgia which is located between a Dunkin Donuts and the House of Mercy, a long-term shelter for the homeless.

PAWS Humane recently took over operations of the Community Cat Project (CCP) begun by Best Friends Animal Society in 2014. When Rachel Hoyle, PAWS CCP coordinator, learned of the colony she wasted no time heading to the site to check it out. There she met, Joe Podeszwa, colony cat caregiver extraordinaire.

Joe claims he needed something to do after his daughter grew up and moved to Florida. He certainly found it and now takes care of colonies in both Columbus and Phenix City.

Rachel said that when she first arrived at the colony all the cats immediately scurried away from her. When Joe drove up they came running. Joe explained, “I've always had a way with animals. They just trust me.” Joe named one pretty feline “The Princess of the Parking Lot”. When he first began working with this colony she was terrified of people. Now she comes right out and jumps into his van when he arrives. Joe says, “animals just want someone to care and be nice to them.”

This colony is also blessed with Bobby, the resident cat caregiver at the House of Mercy. He has been tending the cats for the past 15 years. He was excited recently when the Animal SOS Foundation teamed up with Alex Marquez of Boy Scout Troup 2 to build cat shelters and feeding stations for the colony. They tried placing cat shelters in the area but they kept getting pulled out by local businesses. This time they placed the cat shelters on the House of Mercy property. Who better to truly understand the needs of free-roaming cats.

By my count there are no less than 5 organizations and many more individual animal welfare workers and concerned citizens joining together to make life better for 50 otherwise anonymous cats.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.