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Kalik saves feline friends at CAT

By Deborah Moon Seldner
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The thousands of cats who have been saved by the Cat Adoption Team since its creation in 1998 probably owe their lives to Jessy--a "very sweet," 16-year-old cat who captivated a confirmed dog person and left him devastated when she died.

Evan Kalik, the 66-year-old founder of CAT, the largest no-kill cat shelter and hospital in Oregon, said he doesn't know how Jessy captured his heart; he'd always been "indifferent" to cats. When he remarried in 1986, two years after his first wife died of breast cancer, his new wife brought her elderly cat with her. Soon Kalik was driving Jessy to her weekly veterinary appointments on the other side of Miami Beach to have her eyes treated. When she died, he was devastated and quickly adopted two kittens.

Then, in 1993, he and his former in-laws sold their orthopedic business and he retired. The business had done very well, so he made a deal with his veterinarian. If the vet would take in and spay or neuter unwanted cats and dogs, Kalik would pay for their care until they were adopted. Kalik said he spent about \$100,000 to save 100 to 150 animals.

In 1994, Kalik and his family moved to Oregon. Four years later, he told his sons he would build them a 25,000-square-foot building for their fireplace

business if they'd given him 2,000 feet upstairs for free for a cat shelter. He told his wife he'd start with just 10 cats at a time, but when he looked at the architect's plans, he realized it would be easy to expand the cage layout to house 60 cats.

Within a week all the cages were full.

Initially Kalik ran the shelter solely with the aid of volunteers.

Today, the shelter houses about 250 cats and has 16 employees along with countless volunteers. In addition to the 60 cages, the shelter has five "free-roam" rooms for sociable cats who get along with other cats and people. Cats with terminal illnesses such as feline leukemia are kept comfortably isolated from other cats.

Now CAT is the primary presence in the building. CAT includes the shelter, a cat hospital and a store for cat accessories. Additionally, CAT has about 250 cats in foster homes and places cats for adoption through several off-site locations such as PetSmart stores. Last year CAT accepted about 800 cats from Multnomah and Washington county animal shelters to keep them from being euthanized. Individuals dropping off cats are asked to make a donation, but shelters do not pay CAT to take excess animals.

Last year, the shelter adopted out nearly 2,100 cats on a budget of \$385,000. The shelter has saved about 7,000 cats since it opened.

"This is a money-spending business," said Kalik.

He said the money he made from the sale of his last business enabled him to start CAT, but donations and volunteers are what keep it afloat.

"I think God would look on it (CAT) as a mitzvah, but that's not why I do it," said Kalik, who was raised in an Orthodox home but has considered himself Reform since marrying a Reform woman at age 19. "I'm the most selfish person I know. I do it because it makes me feel so good."

Jewish terms roll off Kalik's tongue with ease. He describes his meeting with some cats as "beshert." He said he has a prayer list of cats and people he prays for each night, but he doesn't use the Mishebeirach (the Jewish prayer for healing), he just asks God for what they need. The Talmudic saying that "He who saves one life saves the entire world" is the basis for his policy to try to save the life of every cat that comes through CAT's doors.

One aspect of CAT that is unique, according to Kalik, is that it will take any cat, regardless of its physical condition. Even cats with a fatal illness are kept alive if they can eat and aren't in pain.

"We make a hospice for them," Kalik said.

Kalik said people often tell him the amount he spends on medical care for seriously ill cats doesn't give him the "biggest bang for the buck." But Kalik said it does give him the biggest "emotional bang." Saving a life is unique, he said.

"I see miracles here every day," said Kalik of cats that have recovered and gone on to good homes despite seemingly insurmountable odds.

He mentions one cat who needed major surgery to repair two broken legs and who endured months of therapy after her pelvis was broken. That cat went on to spend many happy years in an adoptive home before dying last year.

Rocky, a new resident at CAT, is now recovering from surgery to remove a growth so large it stuck out of his mouth. Miraculously, said Kalik, the growth was not cancer and Rocky is now recovering from a cold before becoming available for adoption.

For Kalik, people are the most difficult part of the equation. He said at CAT he has met the nicest people in the world (volunteers) as well as the worst (cat abusers).

"I'm more of an animal person," he admitted. "But by

helping animals, I do help lots of people. They do intertwine."

Kalik said he had to go through a major personality change when he started CAT. Having owned a scrap business and then an orthopedic business with more than 300 employees, he was used to telling employees what to do and how to do it.

"With volunteers you accept what they can give you when they can give it," he said. "You learn to be gracious and grateful."

Kalik said now he is truly grateful for all the volunteers who make CAT possible.

"It takes seconds to say our mission," said Kalik. "We take the sick, stray and unwanted cats; we spay and neuter them and treat them for any affliction; we microchip them and adopt them to indoor homes. It takes seconds to say, but it's a lifetime's work."

For more information on CAT, visit their Web site at www.catadoptionteam.org or call the shelter at 503-925-8803.