

**CAT-ALYSTS**  
“The boys”—Hoover, Thomas, and Army—inspired a friendship between the author (right) and Peg Stapleton, who now trade photos of the beloved trio.

## Animal Shelters Rescue People, Too

Too ill to keep her cats, a Pennsylvania woman was forced to give them up. Little did she know how much she would receive in return.

by KAROLYN KELLY-O'KEEFE

**In 2001, I began a battle** with abdominal cancer. But unlike the heroic patients you usually read about, I didn't suddenly start eating vegetables, take up yoga and mountain climbing, or avoid vices such as diet cola. Instead, I entered a deep depression and lost 30 pounds while my once shiny red hair fell out in clumps.

My three handsome cats—Hoover, Thomas, and Army—grew concerned as I lay in bed for days after each chemo treatment. And so did I. The weaker I got, the more I wondered who would take care of “my boys” if something should happen to me.

I had found the brothers in 1994 through a newspaper ad when they were 4

years old and already aptly named. Hoover consumed his food with the speed of a vacuum cleaner. Army had stripes and carried himself with a military bearing. Thomas was pretty but sneaky. He crept up on unsuspecting visitors and nipped their ankles, earning him the nickname “the shark.”

I knew I couldn't ask my sister, Chris, to adopt or find homes for my cats. She was already taking care of me while working full-time. It took all my courage to call the Humane Society of Harrisburg Area in Pennsylvania to arrange for their surrender.

When we arrived at the shelter, I cried as my friend John took the boys' carriers into the building. Everyone was so kind and tried to

make me feel a little less like a monster for giving up my kitties.

For the next three years I ached with sadness and guilt each day. Giving up my cats went against everything I had been taught about being a responsible pet owner. I prayed they had found a good home together, as I had humbly requested. When the cancer went into remission and the dreaded chemo treatments ended, I never stopped worrying about their fate and well-being.

Although the shelter couldn't divulge the identity of the adopter, a patient staffer assured me they had placed the three brothers with a recently retired woman. I hoped it was true and not said just to assuage the pain of my decision. I decided to write a thank-you letter to the angelic adopter and wish her as many happy years with the boys as I had had. The staff promised to forward it.

As it turns out, I wasn't the only one pondering the whereabouts of a complete

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stranger. The day after she received my letter, Peg Stapleton wrote a beautiful five-page, tear-stained letter telling me all about “the boys” (as she also called them!) and describing a typical day in their new home. All this time, she said, she’d been hoping that even if I had died, I could at least see from heaven how happy “our” cats were.

Peg had adopted them within two days of their arrival at the shelter and had recently moved to Kentucky. She cried tears of joy when she read that I wished her many more happy years with the boys. Even though she wasn’t sure what had happened to me, she had prepared for the possibility that I might want my cats back if I’d gone into remission—a thought that had never occurred to me after all she had done for us.

Peg and I exchanged letters, e-mails, phone calls, photos, and cat toys. She invited me to visit her and our boys. On Labor Day weekend that year, I arrived at Peg’s house for a joyous reunion.

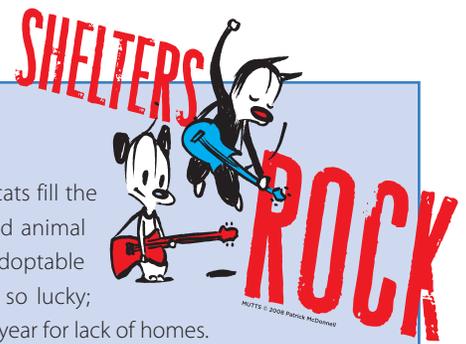
The kitties are totally content with their

lavish “English cat lifestyle” that provides the best of both worlds: a cozy home with every convenience and a pet door leading to a safe fenced-in yard and pond. Peg’s Southern friends tell her the boys “meow” with a Pennsylvania Dutch accent, so I know they haven’t forgotten their years with me.

This is my sixth year in full remission, and Peg continues to donate to rescue organizations and promote the rewards of

adopting older shelter animals. Meanwhile, I tell everyone the story of how Peg Stapleton and the Humane Society of Harrisburg Area saved the lives of three ginger-colored kitties—and gave me the priceless gift of peace of mind—by rescuing us all when we needed it most.

► **KAROLYN KELLY-O’KEEFE** is a writer living in Harrisburg, Pa.



## Humane Heroes

Animals like Karolyn Kelly-O’Keefe’s beloved cats fill the kennels of local humane societies, SPCAs, and animal services agencies nationwide. And because adoptable animals outnumber adopters, many are not so lucky; millions of cats and dogs are euthanized each year for lack of homes.

But across the country, animal shelters and rescue groups work as hard as they can to find loving families for pets in need. In November, dozens of musicians from Carole King to Carrie Underwood joined The HSUS in celebrating these unsung heroes through a “Shelters Rock” promotion during National Animal Shelter Appreciation Week.

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