



Better With Age

Finding homes for adult and senior cats

BY NANCY PETERSON

Some years back, when Kim Saunders, Petfinder's vice president of shelter outreach and public relations, arrived early to attend a board meeting at Tabby's Place, a cat sanctuary in Ringoes, N.J., she didn't find the executive director in his office. She found a one-eyed cat.

"I sat down on the floor, and he came over and sat in my lap and he purred," she says. When she told the front desk staff that she loved the office cat, they thought Saunders was joking—they told her Slide didn't like people. Saunders thought *they* were joking. "For whatever reason he just decided, and then I felt like, well, it was meant to be. He picked me."

Saunders adopted Slide—at 14, already a little long in the tooth—and she cherishes every day with the cat, who's now 23. "I definitely, firmly believe in older pets," she says.

Her organization does too: For more than 10 years, Petfinder has promoted Adopt-A-Senior-Pet month in November. "We share with the public some of the reasons why [senior pets] might be not just an option, but a really good option who really are ready to just slide into your home," says Saunders.

Each year, Petfinder tries to make it easy for shelters and rescue groups to participate in Adopt-a-Senior-Pet Month, providing template press releases, PSAs, and media alerts

that can be personalized with the group's name, contacts, and phone number so the local group can then distribute these to their media outlets.

The company wants to help out senior animals. After all, when it comes to adoption, kittens seem to sell themselves. But for a variety of reasons, adult cats sometimes need a helping paw.

Lots of shelters and rescue groups already have programs that match senior citizens with adult and senior cats, offering reduced-fee or free adoptions and ongoing medical care. Casting a broader net with other tactics and programs can lead to more homes for adult and senior cats.

Age-ism in the Feline World

"I think that many people have the impression—the wrong impression, of course—that the adult cats are here for a reason: behavior issues, attitudes, have been outdoor cats. Whereas they believe that kittens are here through no fault of their own, therefore they must be more innocent and without behavior issues," says Allison Miller, adoption supervisor at Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control in Indiana.

For her part, Miller thinks shelters should be a little careful about going too far to counter those notions, noting that some shelters may inadvertently promote older animals in less-than-positive ways. "You know, like, 'Oh, he's older. He needs a loving home. It's so sad,'" says Miller. "But for us, it's 'He's older. He's mature. You're getting a cat who is set in his ways and happy to be who he is.'"

Fortunately, many people are motivated to adopt older cats—either because they know the older kitties may struggle to find homes, or because they know that kittens can be a pain in the you-know-what.

It's usually people who have experience, the long-term cat guardians, who walk past the kittens to see who else is available, says Mary Jarvis, interim director of the Washington Animal Rescue League (WARL) in Washington, D.C.

But even adopters who don't come in thinking about an older cat may just need a little convincing. Don't assume that people don't want them—they may just not know of the many charms of an older kitty, and you can do plenty to educate them and steer them in that direction.

A Touch of Gray

Visitors who come to the Lexington Humane Society in Kentucky looking specifically for a kitten won't be steered to an older cat, but potential adopters who say, "I'm looking for a new cat," are introduced to the adult cats first, says president Susan Malcomb.

Adoption fees vary according to population and adoption trends, but Malcomb says the shelter often adopts out older cats for a much lower price than kittens.

WARL's Silver Whiskers Club started 10 years ago precisely because several older cats were being overlooked. Adopters who take home a member of the club not only

get the cat for free, they also receive a free, comprehensive medical evaluation, including all appropriate diagnostics, and a complimentary pre-adoption consultation with a WARL veterinarian. Cats also receive free lifetime medical care and support at WARL's medical center for all preexisting health conditions and those related to age.

WARL also provides free goodies, including a litter box, 40-pound bag of litter, bed, assortment of toys, carrier, scratching pad, collar, grooming brush, and nail clippers.

Other organizations may not be able to provide such generous incentives, but where there's a will, there's a way. In Virginia, the Fairfax County Animal Shelter held a week-long adoption event, Rockin' n' Adoptn', for senior cats last May. "We were doing a couple of different things to [incentivize] people to adopt a senior cat and really to kind of get them over the thinking that these pets wouldn't be good, healthy companion animals," says Michelle Hankins, community outreach program manager.

Signage on the cages—"I'm a senior pet. I'm half price"—drew attention to older cats. "We'll put information, like a write-up about the animal, on the cage and let people know what their personality is like," says Hankins. She sees lots of potential adopters looking more at the cats' color, so staff tries to refocus attention on the cat's personality to make sure it's the right fit for the family.

During the Rockin' n' Adoptn' event, a professional photographer who volunteers for the shelter took beautiful pictures of the cats, and staff created a display case for the photos. The word "adopted" was placed across each cat's photo as they found homes. Featured cats were 5 years and older and received free spay/neuter and had half-price adoption fees of \$15. Cats 7 and older received free blood work to help potential adopters make an educated decision about moving forward. All senior-cat adopters received a gift bag with a cat bed, food, scratching box, and cat toys. Hankins believes that although people come to the shelter



Who needs youth when you've got a face like this? Tigr, a 10-year-old cutie, was adopted during the first week of a senior cat adoption event at Fairfax County Animal Shelter in Virginia.



When visitors walk in the Lexington Humane Society's front door, they see older kitties in a room that features comfy cheetah beds, toys, scratching posts, and elevated areas where residents can rest or play.

for the right reason, the reduced adoption fee further encourages them to consider an older pet.

Miller, whose shelter in Fort Wayne runs a program called Old Friends, New Homes, agrees that money talks. "When someone is looking at a senior cat, they feel more comfortable knowing that since the adoption was only \$10 [as opposed to the regular \$65], they have extra money to tend to medical needs of an older cat if necessary."

Finding Their Sweet Spot

When potential adopters first enter the Fort Wayne shelter, they see fliers and big posters that extoll the benefits of older cats and a lovely, large room full of adult and senior cats. The room formerly housed kittens, but in 2006 the shelter decided to move the juveniles all the way to the back of the adoption center, "so that every guest had to pass by our adult cat rooms before seeing our kittens," Miller says.

Customers eager to adopt a kitten are encouraged to look at the adult cats. They get excited to meet them because of the way they're presented. Adopters are told, "Oh, my gosh, and look right behind you. Look at those beautiful cats right there," Miller says. "Oh, look at that one staring at you. You've got to go in and meet those cats, too."

For families with children, Miller always recommends an older cat who loves to be held. "Children meet the cat and pick him up and carry him around as children will do," she says. "It's an easy sell when parents see how tolerant the cat is of their children."

The minute visitors walk in the door at the Lexington Humane Society, they see older cats in an inviting cattery replete with cheetah beds, lots of toys, scratching posts, and elevated areas. "Even in the elevated areas, [cats] can still be seen,

and so people can really see how cute this cat is or how snugly it is," Malcomb says. Kittens are in a separate area to avoid stealing adopters' attention with their undeniable cuteness.

Malcomb has met elderly individuals who worry about what will happen if they outlive their pets. She tells them, "Hey, here's a companion that you can grow old with because a 14-year-old cat can still have six years of life." Many of the shelter's older cats have found homes with older folks.

At WARL, staff used to place older cats in bottom condos so they didn't have to jump down when they came out to lounge and play with volunteers in the adoption room. But because people tended not to bend down, older cats are now housed at eye level to increase their visibility.

Colony housing may also increase the chances that older cats will be adopted, because it sometimes allows a cat to choose a potential adopter—even one who initially came in hoping for an entirely different-looking cat. It's hard to ignore a kitty who's made up his mind that you're hers! "We hear that from adopters, you know, 'He picked me,'" says Jarvis.

Jarvis has seen cats get attached to staff and ignore passing potential adopters. That's where clicker training the cats to approach passersby is helpful. "We kind of work with them with clicker training, getting them to say, 'Hey, I like you, too,'" Jarvis says. "It really attracts people to the animal."

Using adopter profiles that ask potential adopters about their lifestyle, the other pets in the home, and what personality they're looking for in a cat—a frisky guy, a mellow lap cat, or an independent type—can help you steer people to older cats who fit those traits.

Telling Their Stories

People love to know more about the animals they're taking home, and telling an older cat's story may tug at people's heartstrings and help potential adopters relate to her.

Miller says that when people hear, "You know, this cat is as innocent as the little kittens that are back there and didn't do anything wrong to be at the shelter," they feel more confident about choosing an older cat.

In addition, signage in the owner-surrendered cat room invites people to have a look, letting them know the backgrounds of particular cats: "I was a cat that had to be surrendered by my owners. I'm a loving, social, friendly cat who gets along with other cats. Please come in and meet me, and check me out."

At the Lexington Humane Society, volunteers in the shelter's Cat Crew program work to get to know the older cats' personalities. When an adoption specialist isn't available to speak to potential adopters about the cats, Cat Crew volunteers can talk them up.

If cats have a compelling back-story, says WARL's Jarvis, tell it. That lets "adopters know that they've really given an animal a second chance, and it makes them feel so much better about adopting." Staff and volunteers in WARL's adoption room know the cats' stories, and who needs some TLC, and who needs to find a home quickly.

Resources

- Find more useful info at animalsheltering.org/wallflowers, and animalsheltering.org/reaching_seniors.
- For the Lexington Humane Society's "Reasons to Adopt an Adult Cat," go to bit.ly/NlnKLV.
- Look in Petfinder's library for press release templates and other resources for senior pets at petfinder.com/how-to-help-pets/.
- Search for "free over three" at the ASPCA's professional site (ASPCApro.org) for info on its program to promote older cats.
- Check out Purrfect Pals Senior Cats for Senior Folks Adoption program at purrfectpals.org/images/SeniorsBrochure.pdf.

For example, in 2008, three cats were brought in when their owner passed away. One was adopted quickly, but the other two—12-year-old Posey and 17-year-old Schmitt—were overweight and elderly. "We really thought they would live with us, but in about one month a couple came in who were so taken by their story they adopted both together," says Jarvis.

WARL's website includes photos and descriptions of the cats, including their Silver Whiskers Club status. TV and radio programs provide additional opportunities for WARL to highlight older animals, as do direct-mail stories, e-newsletters, Facebook and Flickr albums, and videos.

Celebrating Happy Endings

In the first month after Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control began highlighting older cats over kittens, it adopted out 30 adult cats. In the first six months after the shelter was reconfigured, adult cat adoptions went up 20 percent. "I think that shelters need to be strategic in how they promote their older cats," says Miller. It's important, she says, to take a look at how your shelter center is laid out, and how the customer sees it when they walk in your door.

For a while, Lexington Humane Society staff believed that cats in the shelter outnumbered dogs two-to-one, but data revealed that cat and dog intake was the same. It only seemed like the shelter was taking in more cats because 80 percent of them arrive from March to October, and the shelter adopts out about 1,000 fewer cats than dogs annually, Malcomb explains.

To address the issue, the shelter created Project Purrfect in 2010, committing to enhancing the health and well-being of all cats in its facility and increasing community awareness

of cat care, the need for spay/neuter, and the value of adoption. Project Purrfect's focus on litter prevention resulted in more than 550 additional feline spay/neuter surgeries in two years, and with fewer cats and kittens looking for homes, LHS is able to provide an even higher level of care for the older felines who find their way to the shelter.

Project Purrfect's efforts led to a 10 percent increase in feline adoptions in its first year and has resulted in an average kitten stay dropping from 36 days to seven, and the average cat stay dropping from 64 days to 27. According to Malcomb, it has really helped older cats who didn't adjust well to the shelter environment.

Many of the older cats were overweight and at risk for fatty liver disease if they dropped weight too fast. As a result of Project Purrfect, they became candidates for foster care. Their pictures are on Petfinder, so people can inquire about them, and an added bonus is that their foster parents network the cats and tell their stories.

The success of the initial Silver Whiskers Club cats led WARL to retain the program. Cats older than 8 years have been the primary beneficiaries. It's unfortunate that older cats are overlooked, Jarvis says, "because if you've ever lived with a kitten, sometimes it's better to live with an adult cat."

Fairfax County's Hankins was pleased that four senior cats, including one 10-year-old, were adopted during her shelter's Rockin' n' Adoptn' event. The event was extended, and by the sixth week, a total of seven older cats—including two 7-year olds—had found homes.

Hankins says she considers even one senior cat adoption a success, so it has been a great campaign so far. She would encourage other shelters to consider similar promotions, she says, "because a cat that's 5 years old can have 10 or more years and make a significant contribution to any family." ■



Ibis, a pretty kitty sheltered by the Washington Animal Rescue League, was around 8 years old at the time of her adoption.