



COMMENTARY FEB 20



# This Cat Whisperer has devoted a decade of volunteer weekends to the Dallas animal shelter



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The biggest emergency of Molly DeVoss' regular 11 hours of weekend volunteer work at the Dallas animal shelter came late Sunday afternoon. A Good Samaritan rushed two hungry week-old kittens across town, from southeast Dallas to the Westmoreland facility. A dog had attacked and killed the fragile kittens' mother.

Within an hour, DeVoss had the two little ones safely out of the Dallas Animal Services shelter and into the bottle-feeding care of a foster family affiliated with a DAS rescue partner, [Rockwall Pets](#).

This life-saving victory capped off what DeVoss knows was one of her last relatively quiet weekends at DAS. before "kitten season," most likely six weeks away, floods area shelters with young felines -- with or without mothers.

That tough reality is one of the reasons that DeVoss, a saint to the city's at-risk cats, spends most of her weekends at the animal shelter.

It's not as if DeVoss has a lot of time on her hands. Five days a week, she runs a busy marketing and branding firm in the Design District. Yet she has managed to spend most every Saturday and Sunday for almost 10 years, as a volunteer guiding the DAS cat operation.

DeVoss was on duty when I adopted previously stray six-month-old Lila from the shelter in February 2015. Late last year, the Cat Lady invited me to shadow her weekend work and see the feline side of things.

It's not easy to be at the shelter for one full day, much less the decade of weekends that DeVoss has been there. No one with a heart can be unaffected by the endless kennels and cages of animals hoping for a second chance.

While shelter managers have come and gone -- Molly's worked through four or five leadership changes -- and the now-robust volunteer program once ground to a halt for years, DeVoss has persevered.

You've likely heard The Starfish Story: A boy walks along the beach gently tossing starfish back into the ocean after the tide stranded them in the sand. When a passerby points out that with thousands wilting in the sun, the boy really can't make a difference. In response, the boy simply picked up another, sent it back out to sea and replied, "It made a difference to that one."

That's Molly DeVoss, patiently saving cats one by one, since 2008.

She divides her weekend work between adoption counseling in the cheerful cat room --on the "happy side" of the building -- and repeated trips to the various rooms on the other side of the shelter, where each cat's next chapter is at a critical juncture.

My biggest takeaway: Get your pets microchipped! Every animal is scanned when admitted to the shelter and, if there is a chip, the owner can be contacted. If you have moved or changed a phone number, please update your pet's microchip records ASAP. Outdated microchips can be as hurtful for a pet as having no microchip at all.

So what does a day in the life of the Cat Lady look like? For starters, you better wear comfortable shoes and be nimble in moving from place to place and not missing any details.

DeVoss inventories the adoption room before heading to the "lost and found" area, where almost all the felines are first housed. Some are strays, some are owner surrenders, some are trapped feral cats.

Molly carefully and gently evaluates each one. She can tell from their posture, from their eyes, from how they interact with her voice and her small fuzzy wand toy what the next best step is. She then goes through the same painstaking process with cats in the quarantine room and medical area.

She retraces her steps again and again -- always watching for new arrivals and working with shelter managers to make sure the cats' status is updated in the computer system. One of the things I noticed in my hours of shadowing DeVoss is that everyone seems to genuinely respect her abilities.

The cats we worked with Saturday, like most weekends, generally fell into one of three categories based on DeVoss' evaluation:

- **Prime candidates for adoption:** These will soon move into the adoption cat room and be on their way to permanent homes.
- **Ferals:** Cats that have spent their entire lives in the wild are turned over as quickly as possible to the [Spay Neuter Network](#) for a spot in its TNR (trap-neuter-release) program. DeVoss credits this program with making a huge difference for the in-the-wild cats that previously, once caught, had no options.
- **Rescue candidates:** These are cats that aren't yet suitable for adoption but nonetheless aren't wild. There are generally three reasons a cat goes on the rescue list: **Age** (too young for adoption -- less than two months/two pounds -- or too old, which usually means health concerns), **Medical** (injured or a need requiring vet attention beyond what the shelter can provide), **Behavior** (most often, aggressive owner surrenders).

DeVoss knows the most vulnerable group are the cats that need rescues and foster homes ASAP. So her solution to network these felines as effectively as possible was to establish the [Dallas Cats in Need of Transfer Facebook page](#), which is now monitored by area rescue groups.

Amid doing adoption counseling, answering random questions from visitors, and conferring with staff, Molly is furiously posting rescue candidates to Facebook and sending SOS messages to specific groups as necessary. Some weekends, during peak season, she'll post as many as 85 cats and kittens.



Week-old kittens brought to the shelter Sunday. Molly DeVoss

When DeVoss and I arrived for our shift Saturday morning, the only cat remaining on her In Need of Transfer page was Vixen. This adorable and super friendly six-month-old spayed female cat was owner surrendered because the family could not afford her vet care. She has hair loss on her head and abdomen/legs; the vet staff presumed flea allergy.



**Bella** is a BIG three-year-old orange-and-white spayed female, declawed on her front paws, and surrendered by her owner. Hissing and swatting at passersby in the lost and found room, DeVoss says Bella needs a quiet place to de-stress so her real purrsonality comes out.

Elsewhere, we meet a **family of three cats** was left behind with a dog in an abandoned home when the human occupants moved out. The two tabbies are very shut down and scared, while Buff is timid but coming around.

Bella and the two tabbies were at the top of DeVoss' concern list when she left the shelter at end of day Sunday because they would be the toughest placements, requiring concentrated time and resources to rehabilitate.

[Update, 4:30 p.m. 2/20: Vixen and Buff have both found rescue homes, and, DeVoss reports that during a quick visit to the shelter Monday afternoon, she was encouraged that Bella's disposition is greatly improving.]

A frightened, young, feral **dilute torti** hunched in the back of its sterile carrier Saturday provides a prime example of DeVoss' cat-behavior skills. Although marked on intake as likely suitable only for the neuter-release program, she allowed DeVoss -- after a lot of soothing language and small, slow movements -- to touch her. And then later to pick her up. Because the cat showed no sign of aggression, DeVoss thinks she is a candidate for adoption if she can first spend time in a foster home.

Finally, there was my favorite, **Smokie**, who came to Dallas Animal Services a few weeks ago from a hoarding mess. By Saturday, all the other cats that had come out of the same situation had safely found homes. But Smokie remained, partly because he was among the shyest in the shelter and has suffered hair loss (flea allergy and maybe stress). He's far from the "prettiest" cat in the room, so DeVoss is hoping a rescue group will have space for him in its program.

As of today, all of these cats are awaiting a rescue group's response. Like every week, DeVoss will keep an eye on the Cats in Need of Transfer page, updating posts and answering questions. All too soon, she'll also be fostering kittens herself into May.

In addition to her unflagging volunteer commitment, Molly has served on the Animal Commission since 2011, appointed first by council member Pauline Medrano and then by councilman Adam Medrano. Because DeVoss spends so much time at the shelter, she feels she brings an important and needed perspective to the group.

DeVoss does get out of Dallas each summer, spending a few months in Santa Fe, where she works with the local cat rescue group Felines & Friends New Mexico. But she continues to monitor the Dallas shelter and network shelter cats on her Facebook rescue page.

She is particularly apprehensive about the upcoming kitten season because relatively warm winters such as this one mean an even greater explosion in kittens.

She says, "This massive intake of kittens requires a lot of fosters because the majority of them are not old enough for adoption. Our rescue partners' foster homes quickly become full and we are left with nowhere for them to go."

That's why DeVoss has a request of all of you who might be able to help. If you are willing to be a foster, check out the Dallas Cats in Need of Transfer page to see which rescue groups are active with DAS cats. Then contact one of them about becoming a foster. They will make sure you have the right training for what's not an easy job.

If you have difficulty getting the information you need, don't hesitate to email me at [sgrigsby@dallasnews.com](mailto:sgrigsby@dallasnews.com) and I'll get you in touch with the right folks.

And take some time on an upcoming Saturday or Sunday to visit the animal shelter and meet Molly DeVoss. She can't imagine spending a weekend day anywhere else:

"We are needed *here*," DeVoss says. "Other operations can be no-kill, but DAS can turn no Dallas animal away, and space is finite. So our dogs and cats are all at-risk. My intent is to save as many of them as I can."



Molly DeVoss with Isabella, who was adopted shortly after this photo was taken Saturday. DMN photo



Molly DeVoss doesn't take a moment off during her shelter work. When she stopped for a moment to answer questions, she used that time to also do some claw clipping. DMN photo.