

FEATURE STORY

Saving a sanctuary

Elk Grove animal refuge calls for community support

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Published: Friday, July 13, 2012 11:52 AM PDT

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The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals stated that approximately 5 million to 7 million companion animals enter animal shelters nationwide every year; nearly 3 million to 4 million are euthanized. Sixty percent are dogs and 70 percent are cats.

Elk Grove's Animal Rescue League (ARL) is doing its part to lessen these adverse statistics by rescuing stray and abandoned animals; specifically feral cats, in which the no-kill, nonprofit has rescued hundreds to date.

Yet ARL is currently in dire need of financial assistance to keep its Mason's Place shelter in Galt open. The current state of the economy has caused its number of volunteers, grants, and donations to drop dramatically over the past 18 months.



Photos by Steve Crowley - The current money situation has placed a heavy burden on everyone at ARL.

Because of the financial slump, ARL has been unable to keep up with the shelter's monthly rent; it currently owes 16 months in back payments and will be forced out of the location if they don't come up with at least \$5,000 soon.

This, and the costs it takes to take care of the cats when sick has become a stringent burden on the organization.

"When the economy hit us it really killed us," said RJ Verni, executive director and co-founder of ARL. "We've stopped rescuing now for about a year because we just haven't had the funds...but we have dedication to our animals."

In addition to Verni, ARL includes co-founder Pam Pittenger, and volunteers Darryl Skeva and Sherry Liddick.

The organization currently hosts 100 cats in the shelter; ARL has rescued additional cats that are kept in foster homes for the time being.

Verni originally got involved with rescuing kittens after an unfortunate circumstance she'd witnessed while consulting at a local golf complex.

She'd seen someone drop a bag on the property; figuring it was trash, she walked over to pick up and dispose of it.

"I thought I'd just throw the bag away but all of a sudden I heard this rustling," Verni said.

Suddenly she noticed the sound of a kitten's meow.

"I opened the bag and there was this 3-month-old kitten...then she jumped out the bag and ran away," she said.

Upon mentioning her find to the president of the golf course, she found out that there is a problem with feral cats in the community.

Verni said that being originally from Boston, the concept of abandoned animals in general was new to her.

"Being a cat lover I thought to myself, 'What can I do about all these cats?'" she said.

Verni, Pittenger, and their volunteers would soon begin ARL, and began hosting monthly cat adoption functions at Petco on Laguna Boulevard in Elk Grove.

They continue to do so each second Saturday of the month.

Yet, in the last three years adoptions at Petco began to drop, so ARL recently decided to open their animal shelter; a once-abandoned home in Galt that was leased to Verni in 2005.

For the past few years the organization has used the home as a shelter to host many of the feral kittens they take in; they're now aiming to turn it into an adoption site.

In completing this transition, ARL was told that they would need to include more lights and more cameras at the location to distract people from randomly dropping their cats off at the shelter; an abandonment problem they've already experienced.

Along with the additions to the building, the organization would also like to add couches and other belongings to complete the shop – all of which they aim to do if they don't get evicted soon.

In adopting cats, ARL's main mission is to make sure each cat is placed with the proper owner; they make sure they deliver the cats to each home to watch how it relates with its future

owners.

The organization offers their animals for an adoption fee of \$100; this includes all shots, dental care if needed, spay and neutering, microchipping, and a wellness check.

If the cat is 7 years or older, a senior (blood) panel is done to check the status of animal's health and the results are shared with the proposed owner.

"It helps the adopter make a better decision when choosing an older cat," Verni said.

ARL doesn't pick or chooses which cats they save even if the particular rescue may be difficult.

"All these animals deserve a chance...we just don't euthanize them because they cost us lots of money to care for them," Verni said. "We believe that all animals have value... having a pet enriches your life."

In order to help keep Mason's Place open, ARL needs more volunteers and financial assistance from the community.

To become involved, visit the organization's website at www.SaveTheCatHouse.org.

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