

Hanging on by a whisker

Pickering woman neglects her own health to help 300 abandoned felines, all of whom need a home

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She weighed all of three pounds and was so cold her body temperature didn't even register on the thermometer. It was a toss-up, the vet said, whether she'd freeze or starve to death.

Joyce Smith wouldn't accept the homeless cat's fate.

"I said, 'Put her on life support. Give her a chance.'" After two months of TLC, a healthy and beautiful Icicle was melting the heart of a delighted new owner.

Hers is one of the happier tales of the thousands of animals Smith has rescued over the years. But the 300 cats the frail 78-year-old has taken under her wing are not so lucky. Warm and well-fed, no doubt, but unwelcome anywhere else.

Visitors to Smith's Second Chance Animal Sanctuary in north Pickering are instantly mobbed in the old stone farmhouse she shares with 100 of them. Cats that aren't clamouring for attention or purring on your shoulders perch on cages, nap on furniture or watch birds out the window. While there is an unmistakable feline fragrance in the air – Smith cleans the 20 litter boxes several times a day – the household is surprisingly calm.

It's the same story in the large, heated shelter on the 10-hectare farm where, along with an assortment of rabbits, rodents and birds, another 200 kitties reside in clean comfort, each with its own little carpet, litter box and pillow. Large, outdoor runs provide fresh air and exercise out of predators' reach.

Yes, Smith laughs, she's been called the crazy cat lady, and worse.

"What else do you call someone who's given up their life and works 20 hours a day with no pay?"

She may be a little eccentric, she admits, but it is a devotion to animals that drives her. And she's paying a heavy price. Vet bills average about \$4,000 a month, and food, supplies, and salaries for her two part-time workers cost at least that much again.

While she's fanatical about the animals' well-being, she's neglected her own.

"My health is failing fast. It's very hard on me," she says of the chores that never let up despite five volunteers who pitch in regularly. She collapsed from malnutrition dehydration recently because she'd gone all day without eating. Smith, who's used up all her savings and lives on her old-age pension, relies on fundraisers, adoption fees and donations. But the \$3,000 a month raised by a charity bingo stopped in the fall when the bingo hall closed. Smith is hoping to start a new charity bingo in January at another hall in Pickering.

Meantime, she fears the landowner who has let her use the property since 1996 may soon take it back.

"I'm here on borrowed time," she says. "We've been in real trouble since we lost the bingo."

The animal lover who could never say no to a creature in distress is finally forcing herself to do so.

"It's breaking my heart," she says. Smith has stepped in for countless irresponsible pet owners in the 35 years she's been caring for domestic animals and wildlife, first at her house in Pickering and later at the sanctuary north of Highway 7 and east of Brock Rd. She has nothing but contempt for people who refuse to have their pets sterilized or discard them like disposable objects.

"People dump cats on us all the time. They should see those cats dying of a broken heart, not eating, after they watch the people they love drive away without them."

Once cats are healthy and have been spayed or neutered, they're adopted out through Pet Finders, PetSmart and her website (www.second-chance.ws/).

Raised on a Durham farm, Smith recalls the injured bird she nursed until her mother said it was time to let it go.

"I held my hand up and watched him fly away until he was just a little speck in the sky. It was such a wonderful feeling."

It's her commitment to giving every animal a second chance that keeps her going, she says, remembering Icicle's miraculous recovery.

"She would put her paws around me. She knew it was me who saved her."