



FERAL CAT FOCUS INC. COMMUNITY CAT NEWS

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PROVIDING FERAL & FREE-ROAMING CATS WITH FUNDAMENTAL COMMUNITY SERVICES

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BETTY'S CATS: AN INTERVIEW

BY SUE SELLINGSLOH

The Gowanda Correctional Facility sits on a 300-acre site a few miles outside of the village of Gowanda in Erie County. Betty Gabel started employment at the prison in 1997 as a secretary in the parole department. Throughout her time there, Betty was involved in the care and TNVR of over 35 cats who lived on the grounds. Because of her dedication and hard work, the lives of many cats were saved and a good number were eventually relocated when the prison closed in early 2021. This is Betty's story.

FCF: You started working at Gowanda in 1997. When did you first know about the cats?

Betty: Around 2014 an officer told me about some sick cats who were living near the Compost Barn where they threw away discarded food. The cats were not getting good nutrition from that type of food and so had multiple health issues. I wanted to trap the sick ones to get them to my veterinarian. I had heard of Feral Cat FOCUS but the prison administrators were not in tune with the whole TNVR program. Then in 2015 a new administrator came on board who was a cat lover. She saw one sickly kitten out there and gave me permission to take it to my vet. Sadly, the little black kitten had a diseased eye and other problems. I had to make the decision to have him euthanized. I took him home and buried him in my backyard.

FCF: What arrangements did you have to make to start the TNVR program?

Betty: Well, I had to have permission to be on the grounds between 3:00pm and 8:00pm (after hours). I had to go through the warden who gave me permission to work with Feral Cat FOCUS to trap the cats. I started that process in 2015.

All in all, I got about 35 cats done in the next 5 years. It was a lot of work—a lot of trap-setting and waiting. Feral Cat FOCUS provided much needed support. Eventually, the cats who were done got healthy. I was able to start feeding them good nutritious cat food that was so much better than the decayed food they had been eating. But still some of them were so sick to save. I always took the bodies home and buried them in my yard. I also took a few of the cats into my home and I still have them today.

FCF: What would you say were some problems you encountered?

Betty: At first, I encountered opposition or lack of interest from prison officials. But after 2015, I did have permission to be on the grounds after hours and to trap and return the cats through Feral Cat FOCUS procedures. But I did have to put up with resistance from other workers, especially when I put up notices for my fundraisers to get donations to buy cat food. But I just kept my cool and stayed as professional as I could and kept going.



BLACK BEAUTY & TABBY CAT

FCF: The prison closed earlier this year. What kinds of arrangements have been made for the cats?

Betty: Well, I had retired in April of 2020. After that I was no longer doing TNVR. But I still had permission to go back and take care of my 14 "regulars" who were living under a trailer where I had warm shelters for them. But then in October, a new administrator came on board and I was told I could no longer keep my usual schedule on the premises. Unbeknownst to the public, the prison was slated to close. But he did give permission for me and Feral Cat FOCUS to remove the cats. We got six cats out then and in early spring we got the rest out (except three cats who just do not want to be moved including "the King of the Hill"...). I kept them in my garage at first. Now they all have been relocated to good homes.

CF: What lessons have you learned throughout your seven plus years?

Betty: Be persistent but follow all their rules. Be professional. Get the right permissions. Ignore any negative attitudes and keep going.

BUCKWHEAT (A SICKLY KITTEN)



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FCF: Finally, Betty, why was this so important to you?

Betty: Well, I loved every one of these cats. Each one had a name. How could I not do this? They would all come running to me when I showed up. They are God's creatures. I love to be around cats. But these cats had nobody but me to speak for them. This work gave meaning and direction to my life as well as the knowledge that because of me these cats were loved.

SIDE NOTE: This story has not ended yet. The fate of the "King of the Hill" and his gang of two is yet to be written.

HENRY DANGER - KING OF THE HILL



Feral Cat FOCUS would like to personally thank Betty for all the work she did at the Gowanda State prison to save "Henry and Company". We have been proud to join her down this journey.



And we would like to thank all our wonderful caregivers that have many inspiring stories of their own. Let us hear from you.

And to all our dedicated Volunteers,
WE THANK YOU for ALL you do every day...
You are our heroes!