

The Berkshire Eagle

A Cat's Best Friend

By Peter McLaughlin, Special to The Eagle

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Magdalena Usategui, founder of Francis of Assisi Society, holds Baby, a cat being put up for adoption.

Thursday, February 12

It's a below-zero morning and Magdalena Usategui, in a brown hooded parka and blue jeans, takes six cats in cages from her car and carries them across the frozen parking lot into the Agway store in Williamstown. She puts a sign on the sidewalk that reads "Cats & Kittens: Adoption Today" and starts her long day of finding new homes for the abandoned and feral cats whose lives she has salvaged... lives she will entrust to anyone who can convince her that they'll be worthy cat owners.

"This is Edgar," Usategui said as she takes a large black longhaired cat out of the cage, cradled him in her arms and stroked her fingers gently across the top of his head. "He came to us from a family in Vermont who had ten adult cats and nineteen kittens all under one roof. Most of the cats were sick from lack of food and lack of veterinarian care.

"It was the classic case," she said. "The family had too many cats and couldn't afford to

care for them."

So Usategui's organization — The Francis of Assisi Society — pitched in. They got the cats spayed and neutered and vaccinated for rabies and distemper and convinced the family to surrender some of them, including Edgar, for adoption.

"That's the way we get most of the cats we put up for adoption," she said. "We go to low income neighborhoods and knock on doors to find people who have cats. We ask if they'd agree to have us take the cats to a vet to be spayed and neutered."

In Vermont, the Francis of Assisi people do this in conjunction with the state's Vermont Spay /Neuter Incentive Program (VSNIP) that will spay or neuter the cats of people on state assistance for only \$20, when it would normally cost four times that much.

The Society also traps cats in feral colonies and rescues abandoned cats.

"I've seen how people can mistreat cats they don't want," Usategui said, "and it infuriates me. Just last month we let out for adoption a sweet cat named Min-Min. We got her after someone tossed her out of a moving car onto the pavement of Main Street in Bennington."

People who saw the driver speed off called the Society.

"I've seen a lot of abused cats like Min Min," said Ashley Lincoln, a long-time volunteer from Clarksburg who helps Usategui by fostering cats and working Saturdays at the Agway adoptions."It's particularly satisfying," Lincoln said, "to save a cat from that kind of treatment, help it grow into a sweet-tempered, loving animal and see it placed in a good home.



Francis of Assisi volunteer, Ashley Lincoln, shows Michelina to prospective adopter.

Usategui, a native of Cuba, came to the United States when she was 17 years old. A career in medical research brought her to Bennington to work with Dr. Helene Toolan at the cancer research center in Bennington.

Usategui founded Francis of Assisi four years ago. In an average year, she said, she finds homes for more than 50 cats and provides treatment to more than 100 others.

"I've been salvaging cats since 1979," she said. "I had a demanding job as Vice President of Research and Development at a division of Hoffmann-LaRoche, the pharmaceutical firm. One day I went to a shelter to adopt a kitten and was disgusted by the conditions I found there. It was dirty, crowded and inefficient. I volunteered to help. After a time they asked if I would take the job of changing the profile of the shelter and raising money to build a new facility — all in my spare time as a volunteer.

"At first I said no. I was too busy. But that night I couldn't sleep. I said to myself, 'look you're always talking about how much you want to help animals well look at the opportunity they're giving you to do that.' "

When she retired and moved back to Vermont, she had transformed the facility from one that euthanized 80 percent of the cats that came in to a totally no-kill facility. And she had raised enough money to renovate, expand and improve the building.

In Vermont, she has set up network of volunteer cat foster homes. Margaret Sumner of Bennington fosters cats for the Society and prepares them for adoption.

"The cat I'm fostering now is feral," Sumner said, "and I'm socializing him. He has to get used to such ordinary things as the sound of a vacuum cleaner, television set or the sharp rip of aluminum foil being torn from the roll. Even the sight a human walking toward him is scary to a feral cat. I'm also getting to know the cat's personality, temperament and habits so we can better match him to a prospective adopter."

Her final goal, Usategui said, is to put an end to the explosive growth of unwanted cats and to have a small clinic, not just for spaying and neutering cats, but a place where low-income people could come and have their cats treated free.

"I have big dreams," she said, " but if you don't dream big you'll never achieve big things."

Cat Stats ...

What: Francis of Assisi Society

Who: Magdalena Usategui

Where: Box 496, Shaftsbury, Vermont, 05262

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