

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep386_Fleisher_210112.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:02]

You've tuned into the Community Cats Podcast. Ready? Let's go.

Stacy LeBaron [00:00:15]

Welcome to the Community Cats Podcast. I am your host, Stacy LeBaron. I have been involved helping homeless cats for over twenty years with the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society. The goal of this podcast is to expose you to amazing people who are improving the lives of cats. I hope these interviews will help you learn how you can turn your passion for cats into action. And today, we're speaking with Mikaela Fleischer. Mikaela is the secretary for a non-profit spay and neuter initiative called PennyFix. She has been involved in animal rescue since two thousand nine and she first started volunteering with Castaway Critters, their local humane society. She then met Lynn Stitt, PennyFix President, in two thousand fifteen, when she started volunteering at her facility The Best Little Cat House in Pennsylvania. When Lynn came up with the idea of PennyFix, Michaela knew it was something they needed for every community. She recently had her first experience with fostering, when a cat she had previously T/N/R'd became very sick. She thought she was feral but when they were waiting for the vet, she cuddled up next to Michaela. She didn't want to let her go back outside since she was so sweet and friendly, so she lived in her garage while she recovered and then went to another foster with Loving Care Cat Rescue and has already found her forever home. Animal welfare is a passion of Michaela's and she has four cats and works at a busy animal hospital as well. The animal hospital partners with a local humane society and Loving Care Cat Rescue. Michaela just loves helping animals. Michaela, I'd like to welcome you to the show.

Mikaela Fleisher [00:01:51]

Thank you, Stacy.

Stacy [00:01:53]

So this is fantastic. I'm so glad you joined us and I had originally found out about PennyFix through a little write-up that was in the Best Friends Network newsletter. So, this is how I discovered information about your group. And before we dive into PennyFix, let's first ask you, you know, how did you become passionate about cats?

Mikaela [00:02:10]

I think I was born with the passion. I've always loved cats ever since I was little. I was finally able to have my first cat when I was about twelve and since then, it's just been cats, non-stop.

Stacy [00:02:23]

Excellent. And it sounds like you also work at an animal hospital. Are you a veterinary technician?

Mikaela [00:02:27]

I am the receptionist. I've been with the company about eight years.

Stacy [00:02:31]

So you are the front door for all the folks coming in. The happy face, the person who greets everybody and gets everybody organized and you probably organized the whole clinic I bet.

Mikaela [00:02:41]

Yeah. Yeah, I get to pet all the cats. I don't have to do anything with the, with the gross stuff.

Stacy [00:02:48]

That's excellent. So, that makes sense. Now I understand why you're the secretary of PennyFix because you probably have a lot of organizational skills and that is great. You know, tell me a little bit. It sounds like you've done some T/N/R work and you've done some foster care work. Tell me about PennyFix. How did it start? What is it all about? And how does it work?

Mikaela [00:03:08]

So it was Lynn Stitt's idea. I volunteered with her at The Best Little Cat House in PA. And so one day I was probably sitting with four or five cats in my lap and she said I need to tell you about this idea I have. And she said, what if we added a penny a can to every can of cat and dog food sold in the United States, and we use that money to fund spaying and neutering, rabies and distemper vaccines. And I said that's a great idea. And so that's our goal, is to partner with these pet food companies to save lives, to reduce money needed from federal and local governments and to help cats and dogs in the United States.

Stacy [00:03:45]

And I know that in some states, there have been extra pet food charges on, you know, that go into a spay/neuter fund. Is that sort of the same kind of model here that you're talking about, or is it a voluntary donation from the pet food companies?

Mikaela [00:03:59]

So it would be a voluntary donation from the pet food companies. So they would take in all that money, they'd get the tax deduction for that. And then we would just act as the wallet for these clinics to fund the spaying and neutering.

Stacy [00:04:12]

When did this program start?

Mikaela [00:04:13]

We started in two thousand seventeen.

Stacy [00:04:16]

And how have things been going?

Mikaela [00:04:18]

It's been good. It's been a little slow. We've been providing grants through donations from all our supporters so far. It's been a little slow getting in contact with the pet food manufacturers. They want us to be more widespread across the United States before they agree to partner with us, but we think if just one pet food company jumped on board that more would follow.

Stacy [00:04:39]

So one of the things that we could do to help this initiative would be to get more clinics signed up all around the country?

Mikaela [00:04:45]

Oh, yes. Definitely. We've funded fifteen clinics so far, in eleven different states, and we're trying to reach every state in the United States.

Stacy [00:04:53]

Fantastic. That's great. And do you have to be a nonprofit organization to get funds?

Mikaela [00:05:00]

I believe so. You have to get in touch with our grant coordinator. She sends out paperwork. We do require a list of how many dogs and how many cats were able to be fixed in order to provide the grant. So they do the clinic first and send us the paperwork back and then we give them the grant.

Stacy [00:05:18]

Can I ask you what a typical grant size would be?

Mikaela [00:05:21]

Right now we're doing grants of two thousand dollars each.

Stacy [00:05:24]

That's great. It helps, every dollar helps that's for sure. Have you felt an impact with regards to Covid, you know, from either organizations reaching out to get more assistance or even on the other side maybe from the pet supply side?

Mikaela [00:05:40]

We haven't really felt an impact from the pet supply side because we were kind of also, not really moving a lot during Covid. We did hear from a lot of clinics. We had one clinic that we had provided a grant to before and said hey, you know Covid's been tough for us. Can we have another grant? And we said well, it's been tough for everybody so it's kind of difficult. It was a difficult position for us to be in but we want to help as many clinics as we can first, before we're able to start going back and funding the same clinics. So if we get those pet food manufacturers on board, we'll be able to continue providing those grants to the same clinics, to different clinics, like that.

Stacy [00:06:19]

Is there an opportunity for maybe some of the mid-size retailers to participate in this? Or is it only for the pet food manufacturers?

Mikaela [00:06:29]

Oh, yeah. We've sent a message to Chewy. I mean, if a pet store like Petco or PetSmart or even a small one, we have some small ones here, if they wanted to do that with their inventory that would be great too.

Stacy [00:06:41]

Excellent. So you're willing to be flexible and work with them. You know, it's interesting because one of the things that I'm heading up is a, in Massachusetts, is a pet food pantry task force. And what we're doing in Massachusetts is a lot of the human food pantries don't have a tradition of giving out pet food, to help with pet food insecurity. And so when Covid started, we created this Airtable database working with the shelters and rescue groups who have maybe in-house food pantries for themselves, to distribute some of the food out to the human food pantries. So, and that's really taken off tremendously in being able to at least provide some pet food safety for folks that might not have the funds to be able to get food you know during this terrible time with Covid and stuff. And creating those relationships with the food retailers, especially with like broken bags or, you know, almost expired food has also been extremely helpful to reduce waste on their end and provide extra supplies, food supply on our end. And so, I think that thinking about our relationship in the pet food sphere is we need to have a closer relationship with them. I think in the animal welfare space maybe we've been a little bit farther apart and work together collaboratively to be able to make some solutions. And right now, there is a shortage of funding for spaying and neutering, for affordable spay/neuter, and times aren't getting any easier. So if the pet food industry can embrace this model, that would be really great. And I mean, it sounds like you're not approaching them through a legislative way. You're approaching them more as a donation. So I think it's a better relationship. Has the response been positive in general?

Mikaela [00:08:33]

Yeah, the response has been positive in general. It's just a matter of getting the pet food companies on board. And we do, we want to let them know we're not taking any pets away from them or not taking any business away from them because we're spaying and neutering. We are allowing people to have access to these spaying and neutering services to feed their pets better quality food if they have that money saved from not having to pay for a spay or neuter. And that the animals in shelters that are being euthanized because of overpopulation aren't eating this food. They're not eating the pet food because they've been euthanized. So we think that's a really good incentive for the pet food manufacturers to get on board with us.

Stacy [00:09:12]

Well, and I mean everyone in the world did hashtag stay at home and foster. And many of those foster homes are buying their own food. And one of the industries that has really grown, I mean next to Zoom, has been the pet food industry. I mean, pet food purchases are up ten or fifteen percent over previous years. The stock market, like stocks like Chewy and, you know, IDEXX for veterinary care and that kind of thing so I think that it's considered to be a very significant growth market. And so the more that these companies can understand that and as you say, if they're assisting to help provide affordable spay/neuter, there's definitely a higher bond that's created with the guardian as well as the pet once there is an investment and veterinary care. And so that they will want to get better quality food, and higher quality food and so I think it is a win-win. So I think that's a very good approach and good angle for approaching them. So I want to ask is there anything that we need to know about from the clinic side of things? You know, how do you qualify? Is there, you said that there's a grant application process. Is that, is it a long process? Is it an easy application? Can you just tell me a little bit about that?

Mikaela [00:10:27]

Sure. It's an easy application. You can just get in touch with us, email us or contact us through our website and I will forward that to our grants coordinator. She sends the, like an introductory email to the clinic, and then the conversation goes from there. She discusses the process and sends over the paperwork. We get the paperwork signed and everything gets going. There is a time frame that we have from when it's agreed to provide the grant to when the clinic is held. So that's something to keep in mind, but it's pretty easy overall.

Stacy [00:11:00]

When you say when the clinic is held, are you saying like a designated day? Like I'm involved with an organization with the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society and we have a mobile spay/neuter clinic, The Catmobile, but it operates four days a week. So are you saying sometimes these applications are for like a specific like subsidized spay day or something like that?

Mikaela [00:11:19]

Oh, no. More like we agreed to supply this grant so you have, I'm not sure right now off the top of my head, what the time frame is, but say a month from when we agree to do the grant to hold the clinic.

Stacy [00:11:29]

Up, to like use the funds up?

Mikaela [00:11:31]

Yes. Yes.

– *Start mid-roll advertising-*

Stacy [00:11:35]

Do you struggle to find foster homes for your animals? Are you struggling to communicate with your fosters and keep track of what they need? Introducing Foster Space, powered by Doobert, where recruiting and communicating with your fosters just got a whole lot easier. Need a new foster for an animal? Simply create the foster request in Doobert and it will automatically send to existing Dooberteers and also post on your Facebook pages and groups. Need to communicate with your fosters? No problem. Doobert makes it easy to communicate via text with individual fosters or to get messages out to your different groups of fosters. Your fosters can even put in helpdesk style tickets for questions or supplies they need, and the Doobert system will help you keep track and stay organized. Check out Foster Space by signing in on your Doobert account today at www.doobert.com.

Stacy [00:12:23]

Join us this January for the Community Cats Podcast 2021 Online Cat Conference, a virtual convention for anyone who'd like to help community cats. The conference will begin with a fun kickoff event on the evening of Friday, January 29th, and then run through Sunday the 31st. You'll join an amazing community of people helping cats all over the world, at this unique event, as you participate in webinars, hear from incredible speakers, and even enjoy some cat trivia complete with fun prizes. Our speakers come from a wide variety of roles in animal welfare, to offer their perspectives on the industry, along with valuable information that will help you and

your organization create a more humane world for community cats. Learn more about the event and see the full list of speakers, as well as information on how to register at CommunityCatsPodcast.com. It's our third annual Online Cat Conference and we can't wait to meet you there, online of course.

-End mid-roll advertising-

Stacy [00:13:18]

So there's a pretty fast time window for using up the funds.

Mikaela [00:13:22]

Sure and if you need to hold more than one clinic, if you have a smaller spay/neuter clinic and want to do it over the course of a day or a week or so, that's fine too. We don't say oh you need to use all the grant money in one day. If they need to spread it out, that's fine too. Like we've partnered with a rescue that was able to spay and neuter dogs and cats to be adopted. So we didn't say, oh you have to spay and neuter all of these cats and dogs on Monday and we'll give you the money by Friday, kind of like that.

Stacy [00:13:53]

So you don't necessarily have to actually be operating a clinic. You could be a non-profit shelter that has a T/N/R program and you use a private practice veterinarian, but you would organize sort of a special event for this grant money. And that would be appropriate too?

Mikaela [00:14:08]

Yes. It can be for anyone who does spaying and neutering services.

Stacy [00:14:11]

And you had said that you were represented in eleven states. Are there any particular states that you're maybe not represented that you would want to have some representation from?

Mikaela [00:14:21]

We really want to reach more people in the Southern United States, where overpopulation is a bigger problem than say Northern New England states like that.

Stacy [00:14:33]

So that's where you like you need more representation down in the Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Texas.

Mikaela [00:14:39]

Yep, and we have provided grants to Georgia and Mississippi. I'm just looking at our list right now, but more Southern States. We haven't really done too much out in the Midwest. So if we could get more clinics from that area, we could hit every state.

Stacy [00:14:54]

What about Tennessee? Are you represented there?

Mikaela [00:14:57]

Yes, we have done one in Tennessee. I believe we have a grant pending for another location in Tennessee as well.

Stacy [00:15:03]

Yeah, there's some great stuff happening in Tennessee with Julie Jacobson from Spay Tennessee. So it's great. Lots of great work going on all around the country and I think it's wonderful to have this program that is focused on a national scale. As you think, going forward and growing the program, do you have any concerns about that growth?

Mikaela [00:15:21]

We don't. Lynn has actually said, Lynn our president, has said if we get one pet food manufacturer on board and they want to say, well we want to take it over, we will hand it over. You know, we just want to get this thing rolling. We want to get these pet owners, and unowned pets able to be spayed and neutered. And so, if a pet food manufacturer says we will jump on board with you but we want to take it over, we'll hand it over.

Stacy [00:15:46]

But if you get multiple manufacturers, then that's even better because you will have more money in the pot. So there's some strategies there to think about also and how they would want to brand it and promote it and that kind of thing, but I'm a fan of collaboration too. And so there may be a way of doing that in a collaborative effort and then really being able to scale the numbers across the country. Do the funds

only cover spay/neuter or does it cover other components like vaccines, any complications? Are there, other expenses that these grants cover?

Mikaela [00:16:21]

They do cover spaying and neutering, rabies and distemper vaccines. And I do believe if they are doing a procedure and they find something that it would cover that as well. I don't know yet. I think in the future we want to do that but as of right now it covers spaying and neutering, rabies and distemper vaccines.

Stacy [00:16:39]

Well, that's great. That's the key priority. When you first started out did you just focus on Pennsylvania as the first state and sort of work locally or did you already start it out as a big national idea?

Mikaela [00:16:53]

We did start in Pennsylvania. The first clinic that we provided a grant to we looked at the area in Pennsylvania that had the lowest income and provided a spay/neuter grant to a clinic in that area.

Stacy [00:17:09]

It looks like you're talking about strategy here. So I'm going to ask you some tough questions about strategy. So, you know, you talk about lowest income area and I often talk about clearly defining what your spay/neuter black hole areas are, in either your state or in my dream world in the nation. So, if you start looking at this as a national type program, what's the metric that you use to clearly identify what is a potentially, a black hole area or an area of greatest need for spay/neuter services?

Mikaela [00:17:40]

Sure. I think low-income areas are the ones we have to hit the hardest because some of these people, they love their animals and they keep taking animals in and they don't necessarily have the funds to get them spayed and neutered. And the next thing you know, they've got litter after litter and they are just overwhelmed. So we want to be able to provide them with that spay and neuter service so that they're able to keep their pets. And the colony caretakers are able to feed their colonies and manage their colonies and not have to, you know, take money out of their own pocket, to help these pets and unowned pets.

Stacy [00:18:18]

So if someone said that they wanted you to do a grant in Wyoming and you didn't really know anything about Wyoming. The first thing you would do is look for the like the listing of the counties with the lowest income levels?

Mikaela [00:18:30]

We can do it that way. We also have been asking people to nominate clinics for us to provide a grant for. So if you know, of a clinic in Wyoming, for example, even if it's not the lowest income area, that's something we can get in touch with them and see if they'd like to have a grant provided to them.

Stacy [00:18:46]

How much of the money that you take in at this point in time, actually are, is part of the Penny program versus general donations and fundraising that you're doing that's more traditional?

Mikaela [00:18:56]

Everything right now has been through donations and one hundred percent of those funds are used toward the grants. So anything else that we need like stamps or t-shirts with our PennyFix logo on it, that comes out of pocket from us. Website, we're all doing that out of pocket. So one hundred percent of the donation goes to the grants and nothing goes toward administrative costs.

Stacy [00:19:21]

So you are, you're an all -volunteer team working for this initiative.

Mikaela [00:19:26]

Yes.

Stacy [00:19:27]

So if there are folks or their businesses or organizations, that would be interested in making a donation or finding out more about your program, how would we do that?

Mikaela [00:19:36]

So they can go to PennyFix.org. We also have a Facebook and Instagram page, it is PennyFix 2017 on both of those. And you can also give Lynn Stitt, our president, a call and her phone number is listed on our website PennyFix.org.

Stacy [00:19:53]

Excellent. That sounds good. Do you ever get stories back from any of the clinics?

Mikaela [00:19:57]

Oh sure. Yes, we do. One of the very first clinics that we provided a grant to, this woman had a dog that kept getting loose and the humane society said, we're not giving you your dog back until you get it fixed, until you build a proper shelter for him and she didn't have the money to do that. So with the grant from PennyFix, the shelter provided the outside dog house for him and PennyFix provided the funds for the neuter. So, she was able to keep her dog.

Stacy [00:20:25]

Excellent. That's great. Do you keep a running tally of like, how many cats and dogs were assisted through the grants?

Mikaela [00:20:32]

Yes. So far, we have been able to provide grants for a total of fifteen clinics and those clinics were able to spay and neuter a total of two hundred and eighty-six cats and eighty-six dogs.

Stacy [00:20:45]

What a great idea, really interesting. I don't think a lot of people would think about these kinds of things. And, you know, most people, when they think about getting involved in animal welfare, they're thinking about, oh, I'll be a foster home or we'll start a shelter. Hopefully, people are thinking about starting a trap-neuter-return program but this is something that's totally a different model. And it's really exciting to see people trying to think about different ways of approaching our pet overpopulation situation. So, I think this is a fantastic idea and congratulations to you and your team for getting it started and hopefully we can do what we can to move things forward. Michaela, I want to thank you so much for spending time with me today and I look forward to having you on the show again in the future, you know. Hopefully, when PennyFix has grown and covers the whole country.

Mikaela [00:21:33]

Thank you for having me, Stacy.

Stacy [00:21:35]

That's it for this week. Please head over to Apple Podcasts and leave a review. We love to hear what you think and a five-star review really helps others find the show. You can also join the conversation with listeners, cat caretakers, and me on Facebook, and Instagram. And don't forget to hit follow or subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, YouTube, Stitcher or wherever you listen to podcasts, so you don't miss a single show. Thanks for listening and thank you for everything that you do to help create a safe and healthy world for cats.