

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep390_Wilson_210209.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:02]

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

Stacy LeBaron [00:00:12]

Welcome to the Community Cats Podcast. I am your host, Stacy LeBaron. I've 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 Sam Wilson. Sam loves all animals feathered, scaled, and furry and was taught to respect all life at a very young age. Growing up, the family pets were her companions and best friends. She knew early on that she wanted to spend her life helping the creatures she loved. Like many other children, she was going to grow up to be a veterinarian. That direction changed gradually through her education and experience, which led her to Iowa Humane Alliance. Iowa Humane Alliance's mission, vision and core values align with our own personal ethics and outlook on life. Animal welfare advocacy is simply in her nature and she feels extremely honored to work with a group of people who are as excited and dedicated to making a positive impact as she is. Hands-down the favorite part of her job is being part of the solution of pet overpopulation and helping people take care of their pets. In her position, she has the ability to be the voice for those who have none, including community cats and families with pets living in underserved areas. Being a relentlessly optimistic idealist, she has big dreams of helping to fulfill IHA's vision to create a state where all companion animals have safe long-term homes, where feral cats are valued and protected and where euthanasia is no longer used as a form of population control. Her work experience covers a wide range of genres from being a vet assistant and adoption counselor, to doing mad science after school enrichment for children, to caring for rhinos and sea lions at the Henry Doorly Zoo. Her educational path has covered a broad spectrum as well. She's earned an A.S. in pre-vet medicine, a B.S. in animal ecology and an M.A. in philanthropy and nonprofit development. Being a program coordinator, she serves many functions for IHA, including coordinating, managing, and developing IHA's outreach programs. One of

these programs is ITRAP, Iowa Trap-Neuter-Return Resource and Assistance Program. This program allows citizens access to the resources needed to safely and successfully trap-neuter-return outdoor community cats. ITRAP is growing in popularity, as we continue to work with citizens and municipalities to allow TNR as a humane method of population control. Sam is excited to be sharing about Iowa Humane Alliance and their dedication to spay/neuter, as a solution to the companion animal overpopulation crisis. Sam, I'd like to welcome you to the show.

Sam Wilson [00:02:53]

Hey, thanks so much. I'm excited to be here.

Stacy [00:02:56]

First and foremost, you shared a little bit in your bio but I'd like to get a little bit more detail, on how you specifically became passionate about cats.

Sam [00:03:04]

So, like in my bio, I mentioned I grew up with cats. My family always had kitties and so I grew up loving cats, but specifically, I have a very poignant moment in my life, as a young adult, when I became aware of and passionate about helping community cats, specifically. I was in my early twenties and working as a kennel attendant at a small town vet clinic in Northeast, Iowa. And while there since it was a small town, we acted as the community's holding facility for stray animals. And typically, when a stray animal would come in, we'd do the seven-day hold period and then, that animal, we would connect them with one of the local nonprofit no-kill shelters that was available and doing adoptions for those animals but we would get feral cats in who are non-social and non-handleable. And the result there was very sad because we would hold them and care for them for a week while they were at the vet clinic but since they were non-social and not adoptable, they went through that week of that stress being cared for and it ended in euthanasia. And once I asked the lead veterinarian at the clinic, why don't we just spay and neuter the cats and put them back where they live? And he said that nobody will pay for that. Well, at that clinic, no one could afford to pay for an outdoor community cat because it was two-hundred plus dollars to do a spay/neuter. So that made me aware of the very common problem of community cat overpopulation and how desperate of a need there was for affordable spay/neuter. It wasn't until my mid-twenties when my career path and

education path led me to find Iowa Humane Alliance in Cedar Rapids. And I was so extremely excited when I found IHA because one of their biggest messages and things that they offer is affordable spay/neuter and resources for sterilizing outdoor community cats.

Stacy [00:05:07]

So you found your passion right there. You're like "aha". This is where things make sense.

Sam [00:05:13]

This is where things make sense and I thought, I didn't know it was called trap-neuter-return then but I thought we should just fix the community cats and put them back where they live, early in my twenties. And I'm really excited that there's a very much growing trap-neuter-return movement for Iowa and other communities worldwide as well.

Stacy [00:05:35]

So, when did you join the Iowa Humane Alliance?

Sam [00:05:39]

So, I started with IHA as a vet assistant in May of two-thousand fifteen. And then about nine months later, I moved into the role of program coordinator. And so I have dual training. I kind of flow back and forth between administrative support and clinic support. Then I also manage and develop our outreach programs.

Stacy [00:06:04]

So let's talk a little bit about Iowa Humane Alliance and the clinic that they run and how did the clinic weather the, and continue to weather, the whole Coronavirus environment that we have going on now in our world?

Sam [00:06:20]

Yes, that has been quite the ordeal to try and navigate. Iowa Humane Alliance operates the IHA regional spay/neuter clinic. We are still and we're the first full-time, high-quality, high-volume, low cost spay/neuter clinic, and we're still currently the only stationary clinic that does this five days a week in Iowa. So we serve a large range mostly for focusing on Eastern Iowa, but our regional spay/neuter clinic opened in two-thousand thirteen. Since then we have spayed and neutered more

than sixty-thousand dogs, cats, and rabbits and about twenty-five percent of those tend to be community cats. The popularity of utilizing our trap-neuter-return services is definitely on the increase. Last year, in two-thousand nineteen, we did more than thirty-two hundred community cats out of the ten-thousand animals that we spayed and neutered. So it was pretty close to thirty, thirty-three percent or so of the total number we did. So in a normal year, we have about ten-thousand spay and neuters. But this year with the pandemic, it hit our area this spring, about March, which is pretty well when things started to ramp up I think across the country. By the end of March, our Board of Directors and our management team had made the decision to temporarily close the clinic. So we were closed during a very critical month of April. This was an extremely difficult decision for us but by the end of April, we were all very much anxious to get back to our work and to be here for the community and so on May first, we reopened with many new precautions. Like I mentioned, IHA is a high-volume clinic and so we typically do around twenty-five to forty-five surgeries per day, Monday through Friday. This means that there is, tends to be quite a bit of crowding in our parking lot. And if you had seen our lobby during check-in and check-out pre-covid, folks were just packed in our lobby like sardines, filling out paperwork and helping each other figure out what they're supposed to do. And we have two staff members, who typically manage the check-in process in the morning. Because of the pandemic, we have started having an extra person help in the morning, who manages the flow out in the parking lot. We have a flexible clear screen that blocks our two check-in employees for the most part and we do require face coverings for anyone inside our building. Our staff members wear face coverings throughout the day and while interacting with each other. And in the morning when we're doing check-in, and in the afternoon when we're doing check-out, we are only allowing three families in the lobby at a time. So there's a lot of extra sterilizing, there's a lot of extra steps to our new protocols but we are starting to get used to this after a few months.

Stacy [00:09:48]

So your numbers are still at twenty-five to forty-five a day, or are you at a lower capacity?

Sam [00:09:55]

So we are still operating at about that many animals. We do offer some limited walk-in appointments for outdoor community cats, who are receiving what we call the ear tip package. I'm sure a lot of listeners are familiar with the ear tip. And so if they're planning on that, we do offer a limited number of walk-in appointments depending on where clients live. And we see a lot of community cats for those walk-in appointments. So for example, last week there was a day we did fifty-two animals. There is a day we did forty-five. I think the lowest day last week was Friday and that was thirty-two animals. So we have a certain number of scheduled and then we leave some wiggle room for those walk-in community cats. We all know the community cats kind of keep their own schedule. So we try and be as flexible as possible for those caretakers trying to sterilize outdoor community cats.

Stacy [00:10:55]

So do you still feel pressure from that time period that you were closed for the whole month and or are there surrounding spay/neuter clinics or veterinary practices that have curtailed their services, so that you're feeling more pressure on your clinic right now?

Sam [00:11:13]

You know, I think everyone is feeling more pressure. I know that a lot of the full-service clinics are booking out quite a ways as well, for scheduled surgeries for dogs and for indoor cats. We are booking out quite a ways. And certainly being closed for an entire month did not help us catch up by any means on our surgery schedule. So, I mean, for dog appointments, we tend to book out three to four months in advance and for cats, it depends on male versus female, but typically about two to three months or so, for indoor cat appointments is how far we typically book out. So in general, we have a lot of demand for appointments at our clinic and I feel like that has a lot to do with there not being a ton of other affordable high-quality spay/neuter options in the area.

Stacy [00:12:14]

How hard is it to start a spay/neuter clinic?

Sam [00:12:18]

That is an excellent question. Since I have not been with IHA since its inception, I am not completely familiar with all those steps, but I do know that our team was mentored through the National Humane Alliance program and they were centered in Asheville. And that program now has been, I believe, renamed and taken over by the ASPCA and then, so they're doing a similar kind of mentorship program. So there was multiple very large grants, I believe one of them from the Petco Foundation, that helps get a lot of the expensive medical equipment to help get our team started before we opened back in two-thousand thirteen. And then the current medical team, they physically went to Asheville and, to be trained, so that they could see the flow and how to effectively and safely perform high-volume spay/neuter, where we would be protecting the lives of the animals and maintaining a very high level of care. And so, that's one thing that some folks don't realize about high-volume clinics is, especially Iowa Humane Alliance, our standard of care is not compromised in any way, just because we're a high-volume clinic and we offer an affordable surgery. Our veterinarians and medical care team are fully trained and equipped to handle most, you know, reproductive issues. A lot of the local vet clinics actually refer emergency pyometra surgeries to us, which is that uterine infection that female animals can get post-heat. And so especially if those clients can't afford the services, there at a full-service clinic, those clinics will refer them to us so that we can help address those emergency situations.

– *Start mid-roll advertising-*

Stacy [00:14:16]

Celebrating the welfare of all cats, The International Cat Association, also known as TICA, is the world's largest feline genetic registry and is the number one registry of household pet cats and kittens. TICA was the first, and now, the world's largest registry to allow household cats of unknown ancestry to compete for the same titles and awards as pedigreed cats. Whether you adopt or shop, TICA is the one-stop shop for all things feline. TICA has more than sixty-five thousand members and clients, in a hundred and four countries, who all speak the language of cat lover by helping make an impact on the health and welfare of all cats. Members and clients serve to educate and foster spay/neuter awareness in their local communities and

are active volunteers at local animal shelters and animal outreach programs. TICA takes an active role in numerous citizen advisory groups to foster legislation, to aid the health and welfare of all cats. To learn more about TICA, go to www.tica.org.

Stacy [00:15:11]

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Stacy [00:16:13]

Are you ready to be part of the solution for feral and stray cats in your neighborhood? If so, then make sure to sign up for our next Neighborhood Cats TNR Certification Workshop. A new workshop is held online each month, generally on the first Saturday of the month, but please check our website for exact dates. For just ten dollars, expert instructors will teach you best practices for trap neuter and return, TNR. Learn what TNR is and why it works. We'll cover getting along with neighbors, preparations for trapping, trapping itself, including entire colonies at once, feeding, providing winter shelter and more. Take advantage of the interactive format, extensive handouts, and video footage of actual projects. Attendees will receive a certificate of attendance and gain access to an ongoing Facebook group, for networking with other TNR activists. The two-and-a-half-hour workshop is led by Susan Richmond, the Executive Director of Neighborhood Cats and Bryan Kortis, Neighborhood Cats National Programs Director. To find out the date of the next workshop and sign up just visit communitycatspodcast.com.

-End mid-roll advertising-

Stacy [00:17:16]

We were talking a little bit before we hit the record button about a program of how you are partnering with some of the local municipalities or how you're working with them to help pass ordinances that are beneficial for community cats. You want to share a little bit about that?

Sam [00:17:33]

Yeah, that would be wonderful. So we are really excited about the progress that's been happening in Iowa. There's been multiple cities in the last year or so who have approved community cat friendly ordinances. And by that, I mean ordinances written into their city code which allow for trap-neuter-return and essentially define ear tip and community cat and community cat caretaker. So that there's a little bit more protection for outdoor community cats and the people who are trying to do the right thing by getting them spayed and neutered. So some of those municipalities - we've worked with Iowa City has been one that's recently made, has approved those ordinances. North Liberty, there is a lot of work done by the Community Cat League and partnerships with a couple other, but Community Cat League took the lead on getting Tiffin, which is a small town, and is close-ish to Iowa City. They have approved trap-neuter-return friendly ordinances. Marion, Iowa has trap-neuter-return and community cat friendly ordinances as well. One that we weren't particularly involved in but I know of and I'm excited about, our capital here in Iowa, Des Moines, approved community cat-friendly ordinances and the Animal Rescue League took the lead there and it's having quite a lot of luck with their city-funded trap-neuter-return program. So it's nice to see some progress in the area in regards to that because we, you know, folks who are passionate about community cats and have been doing trap-neuter-return, often kind of fly under the radar sometimes when it comes to law enforcement or ordinances. And so it's nice to see it legitimized a little bit more publicly. And we, despite the fact that we operate in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to my knowledge I don't believe that there's been any community cat ordinances technically passed. They did reinterpret some of the ordinances back in two-thousand eight, to allow us to keep functioning with our community cat resources that we offer.

Stacy [00:19:55]

So you talked about a lot of other community cat groups, just in, as you were mentioning, what was going on in some of the different areas around Iowa. How does the Iowa Humane Alliance, how do you partner with other community cat organizations?

Sam [00:20:09]

So, as a high-volume clinic, we have partnerships with not only community cat groups but local shelters and rescues as well. So we work with those groups for special pricing and for booking bulk appointments. We also have a transport program, a transport spay/neuter program which is operating currently at a limited capacity due to partially the pandemic, partially our expansion. We're actually in the beginnings of a three-year campaign to raise a total of a one million dollars to expand all facets of our organization. And so next year's phase is focusing on expanding the programs but talking more about the partnerships with the community cat organizations. So we have partner accounts essentially, with Iowa Humane Alliance and other local groups. We work with them depending on what their needs are really. So we've gone to meetings and provided written support and information and acted as a local resource of, for the lack of a better term, kind of the experts when it comes to community cat issues. And we have provided, like I said, letters of support and have gone to meetings and city council meetings, to kind of communicate and liaison with different local officials. And also providing the public with the training that they need to safely do trap-neuter-return as well. The Community Cat League is a newer organization but they're a really fantastic group and they have started offering, before the pandemic, trap-neuter-return workshops which is something that we have done as well for a long time. Where we do a two-hour training, in-person training workshop, talking about why trap-neuter-return works, how to effectively do it and how to provide care for community cats, including taking into consideration kind of the harsh, Iowa winters and what folks can do to help community cats there as well.

Stacy [00:22:34]

We actually have released Colony Caretaking Tips and Tricks, that we do with Brian Kortis and Susan Richmond from Neighborhood Cats. And so there's a lot of information there about how to handle the winters.

Sam [00:22:48]

Yes. Brian is fantastic. I went to one of his seminars and trainings a couple years ago at one of the HSUS Expo events, so he's great.

Stacy [00:22:59]

You mentioned in your bio that you have what's called the Iowa Trap-Neuter-Return Resource and Assistance Program. And how is that different than sort of your standard trap-neuter-return program?

Sam [00:23:12]

So for the most part, ITRAP is a kind of a grassroots style assistance program. And so anyone who is interested, whether, doesn't matter what city they live in or if they're rural, if they're local and can physically get to us, they're welcome to come to us to rent out live humane traps. We offer trap rentals. It's essentially free to take advantage of that program but we do ask for a fifty-dollar deposit per trap that folks borrow from us. We offer walk-in appointments and so Monday through Thursday mornings, we can take a limited number of walk-in community cats as long as they're receiving, what we call the ear tip package. The ear tip is required for, for those walk-in appointments and for community kitties as well, unless they want to actually schedule an appointment which I mentioned earlier in the show. We're booking quite a ways out for those regular appointments. We do offer special pricing. So for the community cat package, the base rate for the ear tip, rabies, and the spay/neuter surgery, that's thirty-five dollars. They can add a distemper for ten dollars and have the option to add a treatment of Revolution for five dollars. And so for the most part, it probably reflects a lot of other trap-neuter-return programs throughout the country. We do also work on a case-by-case basis on affordability. If folks cannot afford our prices, even though they're lower than a typical vet clinic would be, we work with them individually to help them find funding to help their case. We do not want finances to be a barrier and preventing them from getting their colony they're caring for, spayed and neutered and vaccinated.

Stacy [00:25:08]

Excellent. That's great. My last question for you before we have to say goodbye is out of all the degrees you've got, and you've got an incredible number of degrees, is

there one in particular that you felt, that was really important to help you with your work?

Sam [00:25:25]

Honestly, the most recent one, my Masters in Philanthropy and Non-Profit Development. While much of the degree focused on fundraising efforts and development work for nonprofits, it really gave me the confidence, helped me get the confidence I needed to really step into a leadership role with Iowa Humane Alliance. So that coursework was helpful in introducing me to a lot of different topics and especially with grant writing. Grant writing isn't something that I thought I would ever be able to do but I have with the experience from that education and through my work now here with IHA, luckily I have been able to write and receive several grants to help support our work. So while my current work is definitely more programs oriented, it was helpful having that Master's Degree to give me a little boost.

Stacy [00:26:27]

If folks are interested in finding out more about the Iowa Humane Alliance or reaching out to you, how would they do that?

Sam [00:26:33]

So, to find out more information about Iowa Humane Alliance, we have a fantastic website with lots of info. You can find that at iowahumanealliance.org. If folks want to email me or reach out to me directly, you can shoot me an email at programs@iowahumanealliance.org or anyone can call for general information as well, if telephone works better for them. So our office line is three-one-nine, three-six-three, one-two-two-five.

Stacy [00:27:12]

And is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today, Sam?

Sam [00:27:15]

I am just really excited that there's such a large and enthusiastic growing movement to help protect community cats, especially feral cats, and to invest in this life-saving solution that not only is the most affordable and humane thing to do, it is also the most effective.

Stacy [00:27:37]

Fantastic. What a great way to end the show. Thank you so much for agreeing to be a guest on the show and I hope we'll have you on again in the future.

Sam [00:27:4]

Thanks so much, Stacy

Stacy [00:27:47]

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.

Kristen Petrie [00:28:16]

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