

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep414_Metroploe_210727.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:02]

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

Stacy LeBaron [00:00:13]

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. Today, we're speaking with Christi Metropole. When Christy encountered a stray and needy kitten in nineteen ninety-nine, she was appalled to learn that little to no resources existed to help her cat and thousands like them. As a result, she founded the Stray Cat Alliance and soon feral and free-roaming cats had found a formidable ally. Under Christie's unwavering leadership, hundreds of volunteers and scores of donors have since united to provide education, human power and skills, to trap-neuter-return thousands of cats who need help. Under her astute direction, Stray Cat Alliances' dedicated network helps ensure a safer, healthier quality of life for feral, stray, homeless, or community cats, often misunderstood and targeted, that wouldn't otherwise survive and flourish. Christi is acknowledged as the influential and candid voice for those cats. She is the go-to source on the subject, whose opinion is sought by other humane proponents needing sound advice. She's frequently requested as a speaker on critical issues related to cat care and protection, laws regarding humane treatment, and humane health-related concerns. Her experience as a teacher with Los Angeles Unified School District and as a realtor with Keller Williams Realty Brentwood, has honed integral skills that help strategically steer the course and further development of Stray Cat Alliance. Christi, I'd like to welcome you to the show.

Christi Metropole [00:01:53]

Thank you, Stacy. I'm so excited to be on.

Stacy [00:01:56]

So I hear this story here about a stray and needy kitten in nineteen ninety-nine. Is that how you became so passionate about cats?

Christi [00:02:06]

It absolutely is. I lived in an apartment and I saw a kitten and I was like, oh my God, there's like a three month old kitten, I got to go get her and she kept running from me. And it was pouring rain, it was cold, and it was quite a few days and maybe even a week I had to, somebody said you have to trap her. And I did all of this and finding a trap was hard and nobody knew what to do. I finally trapped her in the middle of the night, under a building, brought her into my bathroom. I didn't understand why she wasn't friendly. I didn't know that cats could be unsocial to people and I brought her into my bathroom and she started hissing and spitting at me. And I was terrified of her and I thought, oh my god, what have I done? I have a mountain lion in my bathroom. Like, I don't know what to do, but I was tenacious, I made calls, and I worked with her and two weeks later, she was sleeping on my pillow. And I named her Chloe, and she was with me for eighteen years. She passed away, I think, last year, two years ago, but in that journey in the apartment building, I realized people were abandoning their cats because a lot of students lived there and I was always rescuing them. And then somebody said, well, there's a bunch of cats in this backyard and you did this, and so I went and I trapped those cats and I got them spayed and neutered and I loved it. I thought it was so productive and I saw the need. And it was extremely difficult to find traps, to find spay and neuter, to find funding, and Stray Cat Alliance was basically born out of that experience of, I did it, I can do it. I'm going to make it easier for the public to do it and I'm going to provide services. And so it kind of happened through me.

Stacy [00:04:05]

Yeah, I find that happens a lot. I mean we have an experience and, we experience, what I'll say in quotes, folks can't see it but I'm quoting in the air right now, a problem of some kind, a challenge for us. And we say well I'm going to take care of this situation but I want to make sure no one else is going to see this situation happen again. For me, it was a dumpster full of thirty to thirty-five kittens that you know, were, had runny goopy eyes, and like all the adult cats were off in the woods, you know, looking at me, checking out this dumpster full of all these kittens with smashed beer bottles and all this other stuff. And I'm like, yeah, no, we're not going to do this one ever again. This is just, this is not right. This is not happening again. And we have these experiences that change our behavior. And we also want to create a

ripple effect because we don't want someone else to have to experience that level of frustration, or the struggle, or the worry. I mean, there's enough worries out there in animal welfare than to worry about how am I going to access a trap to do TNR or how am I going to try and afford to pay for spay/neuter services. There, you know, we need to have some help there. And so, you know, we have these moments. So that's great that that you took it to the next step and said, you know, well, I'm going to do this. I'm just going to feel empowered to take that next step and I think there are a lot of people out there that want to do it. What was it that really pushed you over the edge? Just, was it your own inner confidence or you know, why did you feel like you could have the power to be able to create something like this or feel empowered to create something versus maybe someone else who might just think about it but not take that next step?

Christi [00:05:49]

Well, I didn't, I didn't plan on creating Stray Cat Alliance. It kind of birthed itself through me. So I just knew it was a problem and I wanted to solve it but I will tell you what I learned along the way, was the incredible prejudice against cats in the animal movement. And it infuriated me how the focus and, listen, I love dogs, I love them. I have them, I rescue them. The focus was on dogs. Cats were the throwaway animal. Oh my God, if you were a community cat or an unsocial cat, you were at the bottom, bottom of the rung and that made me even madder. So, that was my focus. I wanted to advocate for those that didn't have a voice. So it was very much a justice issue for me. It very much was an equality issue. And so even there's, there's spay and neuter organizations to this day that won't fund the spay and neuter of an unowned cat and they're still around. And so that is what kind of drove me, was to give them a voice, save their lives, respect their lives, help them survive. So, early on, when somebody said, I love what you're doing Christi, I'm gonna buy you twenty traps, I was like, I don't know what I'd do with twenty traps. And a friend of mine who was helping me said, I'll hold the traps and you can send people to me and I'll teach people how to trap. And that's how, you know, the next stage was born, which was me duplicating the work through others and making it easy to find a trap, and easy to find funding or easier and easier to find spay neuter, and streamlining these processes, which I knew was going to help solve the problem. Now, I will tell you, I didn't understand how many cats there really are in the world. I remember a friend of mine and I,

TNR'd an apartment building in West LA. So not a super low income, apartment building but a lot of people coming and going and leaving their cats. We TNR'd like thirty-five cats, put them back, we took the kittens, I did tons of negotiations with the landlords and we were like, what do we do now? And my friends like, we were, have we fixed all the cats? I'm like, I don't know. What do we do? Oh, and so, we were really naive and didn't really have any idea of what was out there and what needed to happen. And also didn't really understand that taking cats to the shelter, well, I knew taking the cats to the shelter was not a solution but I really didn't understand that even for people who hated cats, taking cats to their shelter only to be killed, only created a vacuum for more cats to come in. So, as I started learning all this, I started sharing the gospel. I was spreading the word. And I had a lot of resistance from animal rights organizations who are like, I'm not gonna bother with, you know, those lowly animals, to animal welfare which was, well we don't deal with feral cats, we don't care, we're not going to spay and neuter them. By the way, that's where all the kittens in the shelters come from but never mind that. So I really had, that was more of a struggle for just getting them a voice.

Stacy [00:09:28]

So you're in Los Angeles. Can you just share for our listeners the programs that the Stray Cat Alliance operates now?

Christi [00:09:34]

Well, now we operate, and we've evolved and changed and pivoted over the years and I think we will always do that to incorporate best practices, but we have trap depots. So, if people, they call our hotline, or they really email our hotline, I've got cats, what do I do? Like we have trap depots, you can go, you can learn how to trap. And we know now, in two thousand twenty-one, spay/neuter sadly is very scarce. There's not enough veterinarians. People are adopting more than ever so veterinarians are busier than ever and needed more than ever. So, spay neuter is difficult to get and lots of good people are working on that, but we do as best we can to help them with that. And we give them advice and guidance, we do advocacy, but really, our goal is to empower people. We also run a program at the South Los Angeles Shelter called Safe At Home. We're starting our sixth year. We have staff that sit at the front of the shelter and intercede when people walk into the shelter with unweaned kittens. So basically, under eight weeks. We're only allowed to intervene

on kittens that are eight weeks and under because of the TNR injunction that was in place in the city. And we engage the public. And when we first started this program in two thousand, we talked about it in fifteen, it launched in sixteen, everyone said to me nobody cares. Nobody in those, those neighborhoods, they don't care. When people get to the shelter, they've already made up their mind, I mean, all this mythology, which turned out obviously not to be true. And when we intercede on behalf of these kittens in front of the shelter, we convert about fifty, over fifty percent of the people say, yes, I'll take them home. And it's a very underserved community so we do offer food and bottling, and we teach them how to bottle. We do all the deworming and vaccinations, we do everything. When they're of age, we spay or neuter them, and if that family wants to adopt them, they get to adopt them free of charge. If they can't keep them, we adopt them out and it has been monumentally successful. And the beauty is that we are teaching a community that didn't have any access to information or resources, what the possibilities are for life-saving, and we're just super proud. The other thing we do is we run a return to field, which we call the Return to Home program, for community cats out of Long Beach Animal Care Services. When we first got there, the save rate for cats was ten or twenty percent. They just closed the year with a ninety-seven percent save rate for cats. That's not a combined dog and cat, that's just the cat save rate and it was also born out of this return to home of community cats. So we would take healthy community cats, get them spayed and neutered at the shelter, and return them where they came, and trap/neuter, do TNR around that cat. And that is the best model for reduction of intake. The reduction of intake is huge at Long Beach Animal Care Services, and their life-saving has gone up. It's transformed the shelter. It's transformed the way the medical staff and the Animal Control officers see cats. They're no longer a throw away animal. They are treatable. They have a live outcome. There's a road map. There were so many wonderful, unintended consequences of that program. When we started in two thousand fourteen, we didn't really know exactly what we were doing. We were the third in the country but we trudged the road and seven years later, we're done, we're not going to be there anymore. We've taught them how to do it. They've got an incredible shelter director and we're moving on to help other shelters with really roll up your sleeves, hands-on work with community cats, and who to return and who not to return. And what those kind of programs, when they're embedded in shelters, is my staff would start seeing

litters of kittens and want to take them all home, and I would say, start networking them. And they would start networking them. And then that opened up a whole new world to that shelter, of people coming to pull kittens, and people networking. And it just, it was really transformational and we're super proud. We also did that in Orange County. So we're super excited about our work with community cats and, you know, fixing them and putting them back. And we, you know, this year, we did almost two thousand adoptions in two thousand twenty. We are not even an adoption agency, but we realized, you know, we had to adopt out cats and if we had more volunteers, we probably would have adopted out three or four thousand more. It wasn't the change in the tide of cats and adoption. I never ever would have predicted, we have multiple applications, even for older cats sick, cats, you know, special needs cats. We get them homes. It's amazing and it's because the public has stepped up. And I think the old days of cats being second-class citizens is really changing and I can't even believe I'm saying this. And even community cats, like the awareness is completely different than when I first started. And I would just, I would just shake my head at many large, well, in two thousand, the Humane Society of the United States said you should put down community cats. Like that was in the writing and that's in other large animal orgs and they don't say that anymore. It's very, very, very different. So, it's exciting, what's happened to our movement and for cats.

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Stacy [00:15:37]

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smelly litter box, softer and shinier coats plus better breath. Try Smalls today for your cats in your household. Hooch loved it.

Kristen [00:16:38]

Use offer code COMMUNITYCATS at checkout for a total of thirty percent off your first order at Smalls.com.

Stacy [00:16:45]

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 Brian Kortis, Neighborhood Cats National Programs Director. To find out the date of the next workshop and sign up, just visit communitycatspodcast.com.

Stacy [00:17:48]

As we emerge from the global pandemic of COVID, fostering is emerging as the new normal in the animal welfare industry, but shelter management software doesn't provide the tools or the workflows for communicating with fosters at scale. So many organizations struggle to maintain hundreds of animals in foster homes. If only there was a system that was custom built specifically to solve this problem. Introducing Fosterspace, powered by our friends at Doobert. Fosterspace was custom built to allow you to manage hundreds of foster relationships and to communicate with them via text, email, and even Facebook Messenger. Your fosters have a portal where they can upload videos and photos and updates on their animals and organizations can schedule fosters for meet-and-greets, adoption days, or anything else they need.

There's so much more to check out. Sign up for free at www.doobert.com and go to the Fosterspace tab to get started.

-End mid-roll advertising-

Stacy [00:18:42]

Let's talk a little bit about LA and what's been going on in LA for the last several years, with regards to their policies around community cats and what your involvement has been during that time frame?

Christi [00:18:55]

So in two thousand ten, an injunction was handed down on the city of Los Angeles and only the city of Los Angeles, not the county, not other cities, that said that the city could not participate in trap neuter return. It didn't say individual groups and individual people couldn't participate, it said the city couldn't, and the city couldn't promote it or pay for it. But really what it did was, it created a gag order. So, prior to two thousand ten, the shelter would send people to us and we would counsel people on TNR, on feeding cats, on all of these things. And when the, when the injunction was handed down that all stopped. And so really people, citizens, their right to know good information was lost because of this and it all happened because the city was sued by certain groups saying that they were participating in trap neuter return without having done an environmental impact report. And the leadership in those days prior to two thousand ten just ignored that. They just thought it would go away and it didn't go away. So they got us into a terrible jam. So the city has this injunction. It's in place and everybody thinks it's going to go away in six months to a year. This happened for eleven years. Like, it was just a never-ending nightmare. So, finally, the city, like for the third iteration, the city council voted for like eight hundred thousand dollars to do this environmental impact report and the draft, they call it EIR, came out in summer of two thousand nineteen. And it was concerning, they had a lot of very concerning elements. They said that, you know, you only could feed cats at a certain time and, by the way, there were many meetings before that and they interviewed us and asked us questions. And I was in a lot of meetings, talking to them but they come up with this draft impact report and it said a lot of things including, it said you couldn't TNR or feed cats in environmentally sensitive areas and one mile buffer zones. So the environmental sensitive areas and one mile buffer

zones were forty percent of the city of Los Angeles. So we're like that's not going to work and you want to TNR a more environmentally sensitive area because that's where you're going to fix a cat. And I live in an area where the next block becomes the buffer zone and there's cats across the street. So we at Stray Cat Alliance really went hard against that. We hired a really experienced, what they call a CEQA attorney, which is California Environmental Quality Act. This all falls under that, and he picked it apart. And we wrote our official letter and we went really hard with our social media, our e-blasts and we had very specific things that we wanted the public to say. And a lot of people pooh-poohed me in like, oh Christi, don't make a big stink because it'll take longer for the EIR to get through the process and they have to read every letter and every email and they have to answer everybody. And I'm like, no, this is our chance to make us think, and say, no, we're not going to accept this. It's not doable to take forty percent of the city of Los Angeles off the table. So we went pretty hard, maybe harder than other organizations. I mean, everybody agreed but it was the tactics. And I want to say, there was two hundred people in a room one night. They couldn't believe it and we were all, except for like three people, we were all on point and had the same message and they came out with the final EIR, a couple months ago or, I don't know, maybe it's six months now and they did it. They took out the environmentally sensitive areas and one mile buffer zones, and they changed the feeding times. And it became a very workable environmental impact report. And they added twenty thousand spays and neuters the city would pay, I think for thirty years, above baseline. So they got a baseline, how many spays and neuters of cats are going on now? Okay, we need twenty thousand more per year. It's good. The problem is COVID so there's the budget. There's no money for those twenty thousand. I don't even know if there's money for what they've had. So, we're working through all of that, but we weren't allowed to have traps on city property. We weren't allowed to talk. We weren't allowed to say the name feral. So Safe At Home, our program at the South LA shelter, was very much impacted. We couldn't intervene on behalf of older cats. We couldn't talk about, oh, you're bringing those kittens in? Let's go TNR those moms and dads. We weren't allowed to talk about that. So we believe that the twenty percent increase of intake of Los Angeles Animal Services per year, was probably significantly impacted because of the injunction. So, yes, intake in two thousand nineteen was up other places as well. Some scientists say, because we had massive rain, and when you have massive rain, you have more

births. I heard there was more rabbits. There was more squirrels. I don't know how that translates to kittens because kittens don't eat bugs, but anyway, but intake in Los Angeles city was drastically up and it kept going up. So, we're working on the no-kill initiative and NKLA and the needle keeps getting moved because the intake is insane. So in two thousand nineteen, the six city shelters in the city of Los Angeles, they took in thirteen thousand five hundred kittens eight weeks and younger. And the solution is targeted TNR and we couldn't do it. So last year with COVID and managed intake, I think the intake of kittens was about six thousand which is very doable. It doesn't mean there's not kittens out there that need our support, and there's not cats out there and I very much believe with managed intake, you still really need to increase your services. And, of course, my dream, and lots of people's dream, is that shelters are now community centers where people go for support. They don't go to get punished, they get services for their animals. They get good information and that's just a better world for everyone, and that's the really, the only sustainable way. And a lot of the laws that pertain to dogs and cats, you know, if you live in a wealthy community and you're, you know, of a certain economic status, like you're not bothered by animal control or you have the services, but if you live in South LA, you don't receive the same services and you're punished instead of being supported and educated and doing the right thing.

Stacy [00:26:05]

Christi, that's great. That's an incredible sort of background of the whole process and then where you think things are headed. I think that's just a fantastic sort of timeline that you just shared with us and really tremendous, you know, last decade plus of work that you've been doing. If there are folks out there that are interested in finding out more about the Stray Cat Alliance, how would they do that?

Christi [00:26:28]

Our website straycatalliance.org. There's a contact page and of course, we always need fosters and volunteers, but we have a lot of virtual volunteers now so you can really live anywhere in the world. And then we have information. We were chosen to be the official trainers of, I don't know if that's not the right word, but the official trainers of LA City for the citywide cat program. So we are going to be starting in about a month doing Zoom meetings that are open to really anyone, but pertain to the city of Los Angeles, and we're going to get to give really good, accurate,

compassionate information about cats, and community cats and what to do. And don't necessarily, you know, a cat is thirteen times more likely to find his or her home if you leave them alone. So people think they're doing the right thing. Some people hate cats, some people love cats, but they think they're doing the right thing by picking up a cat they find and bringing them to the shelter, but we know return to owner is about one percent if you're lucky. For cats, leave the cat where they are. So we're going to be teaching people about that. If they find kittens, don't necessarily take those kittens away from their mama. We get kittens at the shelter all the time that are fat and healthy and their mother is like, were did my babies go. And those kittens are going to survive much better with their mother than us. So we're going to teach people about what to do and how to mitigate issues and feed, and to spay and neuter. So we're very lucky in those trainings will be on our website very soon and we'll be open to questions and we're going to be really gathering resources for, you know, residents in Los Angeles.

Stacy [00:28:14]

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

Christi [00:28:18]

Wherever you see a cat get involved. They need your support. Whether it's feeding or spay and neuter, go to our website and we will help you as best we can.

Stacy [00:28:28]

Christi, thank you so much for agreeing to be a guest on my show and I hope we'll have you on again in the future.

Christi [00:28:33]

Absolutely.

Stacy [00:28:34]

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 [00:29:06]

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