

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep429_Swanty_211108.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:03]

You've tuned in to 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've been involved helping homeless cats for over 20 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 are speaking with Sarah Swanty. Sarah is the executive director and co-founder of Saving Animals Today. Sarah began working at a veterinary clinic when she was 17 to explore her plans to become a veterinarian while pursuing the veterinary track at Colorado State University and gaining experience at clinic. She began volunteering at a local animal sanctuary. And that's when she realized that her true calling lay in animal welfare and rescuing, homeless animals. Not long after Sara co-founded Fort Collins Cat Rescue and Spay/Neuter Clinic in 2006. In 2019, she led the merger with Animal House Rescue and Grooming that resulted in Animal Friends Alliance. Sarah became a certified animal welfare administrator through the Society of Animal Welfare administrators in 2013, and she participates in the Northern Colorado Regional Animal Welfare Coalition and Colorado Federation of Animal Welfare Agencies. Notable honors include Northern Colorado Superwoman in 2015, Colorado Women of Influence Foundation, 12 Women of Vision, and 2018 40 under 40, 2018 and Leadership Northern Colorado graduate in 2019. She led the alliance in receiving a BBB torch award for ethics in 2021 and later this year she will speak at the Colorado Animal Welfare Conference.

Stacy LeBaron [00:01:059]

Sarah. I'd like to welcome you to the show.

Sarah Swanty [00:01:58]

Thank you so much, Stacy. I'm so glad to be here.

Stacy LeBaron [00:02:00]

Yeah, so before we jump into all of the effort and the work that you have been doing in Colorado, first off, I have to ask you, how did you become passionate about cats?

Sarah Swanty [00:02:10]

Yeah. Sure. So growing up my family always had dogs and cats. So I was an animal lover from day one. But I was a dog person. And I can't really specifically tell you why other than probably in part because we had a yellow lab growing up, who was my very best friend in the whole world named Jingle Bells. And so I just thought I was a dog person. Well, when I started working in veterinary hospitals, one of the hospitals I worked in had a cat boarding facility. And so I was the kennel manager for a while and I spent a lot of time in the cattery taking care of the cats that were being boarded in the kennel in this facility and I got to meet all these different cats. And I realized two things. One, I was really good with cats and not everybody is, we know that, right? I have this natural ability to get along with cats and two; cats are awesome. Like as I started meeting all these cats and really getting to interact with them and care for them and see them react to me and bond with them. I was like, oh my gosh, I love cats. And so that was the moment where I realized, you know, I'd always loved all animals, but I wasn't a dog person. I was a dog and a cat person and cats and dogs are really different and cats are really awesome.

Stacy LeBaron [00:03:28]

That's great. That's excellent. I'm just, wanted to do a little bit of a clarification. Now, I have here, you know, your website is savinganimalstoday.org. It's Animal Friends Alliance that you are the executive director of, is that correct?

Sarah Swanty [00:03:41]

That is correct. Our tagline is "Saving Animals Today". So that's why our website is savinganimalstoday.org, when we changed our name to Animal Friends Alliance, we couldn't get that URL. So, we had to go with our tagline. It's a little confusing.

Stacy LeBaron [00:03:57]

So you talked about, you know, how your, you got interested in, about cats, tell me a little bit about what life is like, for cats in Colorado. What's been happening for community cats in Colorado over the last decade or so.

Sarah Swanty [00:04:10]

Well, it's gotten a lot better. I'll tell you that much. There's still a lot of improvement to be made but I started in animal welfare about 17 years ago now. I founded Fort Collins Cat Rescue and Spay/Neuter Clinic 15 years ago, which is one of the organizations that was, you know, merged, and made Animal Friends Alliance when I started the cat rescue in Larimer County and Weld County, which are the primary counties that my organization serves. There was a really bad cat problem in that so many cats were entering shelters and they were not coming back out and nobody was doing anything for community cats, except for trapping them and euthanizing them.

So when I started Fort Collins Cat Rescue, our local Humane Society, the euthanasia rate for cats was almost 60%. This was in 2006 and we've seen just this absolutely incredible dramatic shift over the last 15 years, which we attribute a lot of that to the fact that we opened our high-volume low-cost spay neuter clinic, 14 years ago. And we've done over 75,000 spays and neuters since then. A lot of those have been on low-income community members' pets and a lot of them have been on community cats. So it's so much better than it was. There's still room to go particularly with the community cats and we'll probably talk about that a little later on when we start talking about our various programs and whatnot, but I'm proud of Colorado, I think we're a little bit of a leader when it comes to animal welfare. We're really seeing the industry, you know, embrace community cats and get robust community cat programs going. And I feel really proud that our organization recognized the need for that, pretty much from the beginning.

Stacy LeBaron [00:05:48]

So I'm going to take you even farther back. So you open up this clinic in 2006. And the question that I'm going to ask you is why did you feel the need to start something on your own? What made you take that next step? Rather than saying, oh, well, I've got 10 cats in my neighborhood, I'll just do those. I'll be done and that's it. What took you into deciding you wanted to co-found an organization?

Sarah Swanty [00:06:12]

Sure. So I wanted to be a veterinarian. I always loved animals. I was good at science. Medicine interests me, and so everyone in my circle encouraged me to

pursue that. And so I got my undergraduate in Zoology from Colorado State University. And before I graduated, I started volunteering for another local organization. They're not local anymore. They've since moved and as a little background at this point, I had been working in veterinary hospitals for like seven years. So I was dumbfounded shocked. It rocked my world to start working in animal welfare and to find out that 10 cats walked into our local shelter and four of them walked back out. What? It blew my mind. It made me so upset. I was devastated. It was all I could think about. So I started like baking dog treats and selling them at the veterinary clinic I worked at. Like I was like, anything I could do to raise money to donate to the group I was volunteering for because it was so tragic to me. Here I was working in veterinary hospitals for all of these years. I loved animals, everyone around me, loved animals, and it was like, what? How can all these people care so much about animals, these clients that come in and they do everything their animals need. And in the background six, out of every 10 cats is being euthanized in our local shelter. Do people know this? It was like this dirty secret, right? That was swept under the rug. The community didn't really know what was going on. Animal lovers didn't really know what was going on and it was literally all I could think about. So at the time when I'm volunteering, the group I was with was mostly working on large animals and dogs, but they had decided they were going to start trying to take in cats as well, and it wasn't going very well. The leader of the organization who is an amazing person with the biggest heart, was not a cat person and I just previously mentioned, some of us are cat people and some of us are not, right? She wasn't a cat person. It wasn't going well. They really weren't getting the care that they needed and she finally kind of threw up her hands and she's like, I can't do the cat thing anymore. But there were 17 cats currently in the organization's care that needed somewhere to go and what were the options? So, that was the point in which I went to my really good friend and Anna Neubauer. We were working together as vet techs. We're both passionate about rescue work. And I said, Anna, what do you think about starting a cat rescue with me? And she's like, okay, and I mean, neither of us knew what we were doing. We had no nonprofit experience. We hadn't taken any business courses, but we were passionate about helping animals. We were passionate about changing what was going on in our community. And we had vet tech experience. We knew how to care for these animals and we had this network of veterinarians, right?

So that was the start of Fort Collins Cat Rescue. And at that time, we found a 400 square foot unit in an old strip mall, built in the 1970s that stole one of our campuses, although we've expanded in that building, and that was our first facility. We've moved the 17 cats into that space. We were still working full time. It was like this on the side gig that we were doing. We started posting flyers about the organization and needing donations of supplies. We had like the wonkiest adoption hours ever. It was like Wednesday from 4 to 6 and Saturday from 10 to 2 because we're both still trying to work full-time. And right away people were contacting us not just about wanting to surrender cats to us because we were advertising our self as an adoption guarantee shelter, but to help, like people that cat lovers that were like, finally, finally something for the cats. Because so many of our communities are so much more about dogs, right? And Fort Collins is like this, amazing dog loving community. So, dog friendly, but at the time when I started the cat rescue, there was there really wasn't anything for cats, like no one was doing anything for the cats. So there was a lot of excitement in our community about these two young girls, just starting this cat rescue,

Stacy LeBaron [00:10:30]

You know, it's funny. We all end up starting these things without really thinking about it and then it just keeps growing and growing and growing and it sounds like the same thing happened to you, is a very organic process. There's lots of demand and need. You started out with 17 cats as a rescue, but then you moved into making it a spay neuter clinic. Was it hard making the choice going sort of on the spay neuter side? So many adoption programs are so adoption heavy, right? Where it sounds like you saw that spay neuter need in there too. So you make that strategic decision to go one way or the other.

Sarah Swanty [00:11:04]

Yeah, I mean Stacy, you know, it was like as soon as everyone heard there was this cat rescue. Everyone wants to bring us litters of kittens, right? We couldn't believe how many litters of kittens there were. And with our vet tech background, we're like, look, you've got to get the parent animals spayed or neutered and what we kept hearing over and over again, was we can't afford to get the parent animals fixed and Anna and I went, oh my god, we're not making a difference. We're just another place for homeless cats to come to. We're not actually changing anything. We're not actually moving the needle. The only way we're going to make a difference is if we

offer affordable spay neuter period. And with our background again that was something that was feasible for us and we met a local veterinarian named Dr. Tom Welsh. He found out about us and he said, I will donate my supplies and I will donate my time to get you guys started. Once you're on your feet, you can start paying me. And so within six months of starting Fort Collins Cat Rescue, Anna and I quit our jobs as vet techs. It was absolutely terrifying and we opened the first low-cost spay neuter clinic in Northern Colorado. And it was open to everyone, but primarily what we were serving was cats, starting out. Then you continue to do that for several years and then it look like in a couple years ago. You decided to merge with another organization. So maybe share with us the kind of programs that you have now and talk a little It about this merger.

Stacy LeBaron [00:12:17]

Then you continue to do that for several years and then it looks like in a couple years ago, you decided to merge with another organization. So maybe share with us the kind of programs that you have now and talk a little bit about this merger.

Sarah Swanty [00:12:28]

Yeah, absolutely. So, after we opened our spay neuter clinic, like you said, we have kind of organically grown from there. One of the things that I'm really proud about our organization for is we're constantly asking ourselves, why are animals ending up in shelters? What can we do to stop it? And we've been doing that since the beginning when we opened our spay neuter clinic, so we also have a pet food pantry and we have a community cat program and we have a free spay neuter program. So those are all programs at Fort Collins Cat Rescue and Spay Neuter Clinic had going on. And we had grown quite a bit since then. Well, I have a dear friend and we have it like a sister organization called Animal House Rescue. And Animal House did dogs, they sheltered and adopted out dogs. And that was pretty much the one service that Fort Collins Cat Rescue obviously wasn't offering. Our focus was very much cats and I found out that my friend Ali Eccleston who was one of the founders of Animal House was getting ready to leave the industry. The animal welfare industry, I mean, you know people churn and burn through this industry. It's just hard to be here sometimes and so when I heard Ali was leaving, I thought, oh boy, because Animal House was just an awesome organization.

They had a lot of the same philosophies and we had a lot of crossover with our donors, with our volunteers are adopters and many times over the years community members had been, like, you guys should just merge. So when I found out, Ali was leaving. I approached Ali, and I said, hey maybe now is the time to seriously consider this merger, and we got together and we brainstormed and we made list of pros and cons if our two organizations moved and we realized pretty quickly that the pro list greatly outweighed the con list with the number one pro being, if we pool our resources, we're going to become more efficient, we're going to be able to better work, and ultimately we are going to be able to help more animals. And so we did end up merging Animal House and Fort Collins Cat Rescue and creating Animal Friends Alliance.

Kristi Petri [14:26]

Could your animal welfare organization use a tune-up? Humane Network can help. You can get a free 30-minute consultation to talk through your challenges and get ideas on how your organization can be more successful with less stress. From board development and fundraising to strategic planning and operations. Humane Network has got you covered, whether you're a large or small nonprofit or government. It's a live and thriving program led by a certified animal behavior consultant features specially designed training for shelter and clinic staff on enrichment, stress reduction, safe animal handling and behavior modification. With Humane Network, you receive individualized advice and support customized to meet your organization's unique needs and Humane Network can lighten your load by taking on fundraising communications and other tasks you struggle with. Contact Humane Network today for a free 30-minute consultation. Visit [Humanenetwork.org](https://humanenetwork.org). That's [Humanenetwork.org](https://humanenetwork.org).

Stacy LeBaron [00:15:25]

Of course, you know that Doobert is the only software that helps you do transport, foster management and fundraising all in one place, but did you know that Doobert has powerful e-commerce capabilities? To let you sell your organization's products? Forget paying for Shopify or trying to list your items on Facebook. With your Doobert account, you can list your organization's products and even do auctions right from their rescue store module. Doobert manages your orders. And all of the money goes

directly into your PayPal, making it super easy to manage. Check out the Doobert rescue store functionality today at www.doobert.com where they make animal rescue simple.

Stacy LeBaron [00:16:06]

And then. Now, what are you? I mean, in terms of you offer all these services, do you have physical buildings and locations in different places and you had mentioned in our pre-call about a capital campaign. So are you still sort of in this process of merging the organizations together in a physical way? Or is that a whole new separate project?

Sarah Swanty [00:16:26]

That's a great question. So we each had our own campus building property at the time of the merger. So Animal House had this beautiful five-acre property with, let's see there were three buildings on it, one had been renovated, one was still unrenovated, and then cat rescue had, was occupying 10 of the 13 units in the strip mall from the 70s. We owned eight of the units. And so we knew that one of the great things that could happen with this merger, is that we could add to the five-acre campus, which we call our Taft Hill Campus and eventually move our shelter cats to that campus, so that all of our shelter animals were at the same location because our dogs right now at one campus, our cats are at another, it's not very efficient. It's confusing to our community members. By moving the cats to the Taft Hill Campus, it was going to open up space in that strip mall, what we call our Mulberry campus to expand what we call our community pet services. So this is our public veterinary clinic, our pet food pantry and our community cat program. So it's just win win, win. If we can get our cats moved over to our Taft Hill campus. So we're in the middle of a capital campaign. It's called bringing Paws Together. We're trying to raise about two and a half million dollars so that we can add a building and renovate two buildings that are Taft Hill campus and make all this magic happen. We've raised one and a half, a little over one and a half million dollars at this point, and we're actually planning to break ground pretty soon on the project.

Stacy LeBaron [00:17:56]

Wow, that's exciting. Yeah, very, very exciting news. And I with all the construction going on with the COVID and everything, its labor costs, and every contractor, all that kind of stuff is a big challenge.

Sarah Swanty [00:18:10]

The price keeps going up. I'm like, you guys, it's a moving target. I don't know how much money I need to raise. It's been frustrating. I'm laughing now, but boy, there's days where I, you know, I'd rather, I'm crying. So, I'll be glad when it's all over and I know it's so worth it. Because one of the challenges that we have is we've got this awesome public veterinary clinic, but boy, we're out of space. And then the same with our community cat program. The number of cats we helped our community cat program every year just just keep going up. So there's just a lot of room for growth there still. And so it's going to be so worth it. It's a lot of work in the meantime.

Stacy LeBaron [00:18:42]

Are you also transporting animals for adoption? Or are you only adopting out local animals? I mean, I one thing I'm kind of interested in knowing about is, again the dynamic of being and that's very spay neuter focused, but yet you still continue to hold on to that the adoption program. Yeah, and I sort of wonder, you know, strategically why? You know

Sarah Swanty [00:19:04]

So first of all, I mentioned we've done 75, over 75,000 spays and neuters in the last 14 years. So what we have seen happen in our community, we no longer have litters of kittens surrendered to our shelter that come from our community members, right? Like the days in which, Margie walks in and says, my cat had a litter of kittens. Here's a box of eight kittens. I can't find a home for. Those are gone. Where our local kittens that enter our shelter come from, is our community cat program. We take in several hundred feral kittens that we trapped or our community cat program every year, socialize them, and place them in loving homes. So, the other thing you have to keep in mind, Fort Collins in Northern Colorado, in general is booming. I mean, the population is growing like crazy and this is a very educated area. People love their pets. So we have a huge demand for adoption from people in Northern Colorado. So if we don't have adoptable animals in our shelter, what are we going to do? Right? And we don't have really hardly any homeless dogs in our community. Haven't for

quite a while. And, and now again, the kittens were getting in our ones we've gone out and trap through our community cat program. So, we've got to be, we have to be transporting animals in. If there are shelters that are still struggling, that are still euthanizing adoptable animals boy, wouldn't we be doing a disservice to those animals if we weren't transferring them into Northern Colorado into our shelter, and placing them with these families that want to adopt. They want to do to do the right thing. They want to save a homeless animal. Hopefully that explains that well.

Stacy LeBaron [00:20:48]

Yeah. No, I totally understand it. And there's just this big, always a long-term conversation and a very thought-provoking conversation of thinking from a spay neuter hearted person. And I guess I would say is, you know, our resources that we put into our adoption program. Say we took those resources and invest it in a spay neuter program, you know, in a different part of the country where you were receiving those animals from on. Are we as animal welfare organizations responsible for supplying pets into the community? Or is that not necessarily our role? And that's a question I think that a lot of parts of the country in the northern part of the country. We're asking the question, we certainly are asking that question a lot in New England, which is, what is our role, because New England transport actually is, is very active, but yet it's not enough. So it's still, you know, people can post kittens on Craigslist for \$600 and that kind of thing. So they're still sort of a shortage. The supply is definitely less than what the demand is in the New England states. And but the question also is, you know, ss our role in this world to be supplying pets? Or is it something else?

Sarah Swanty [00:22:07]

It's a conundrum. I mean it's a little bit of a Catch-22 in some senses, you know, our concern is if we don't have animals for people to adopt now. You know people can let their cat have litter after litter and say to us. Oh, I always find great homes for them. And you know, there's this fear that we're going to get back to where we start having boxes of kittens brought to our shelter anymore because all of the sudden, hey, we fixed the homeless animal problem in Northern Colorado. Nobody needs to spay or neuter anymore. And it is it's just it's so tough because obviously there's these organizations in Texas and California and Georgia, in Kansas and Nebraska, New Mexico that are pleading with organizations like ours to take these animals, take

these animals. They're going to be euthanized and there's part of me that hopes that by us helping to bring these animals in, we've got people that want to adopt them. It gives them some bandwidth to start implementing more spay neuter where they are, but I don't disagree with you at all. I mean, I think the future of Animal Friends Alliance, we have so many things we want to do. And one of them is to provide more spay neuter and other communities to help other shelters create models, like we have created because we were successful and I know every community is different, but you know, we all need to help each other out. And we need to help these, these areas, with high numbers of homeless animals to get this under control, to get spay neuter organizations clinics up and running.

Stacy LeBaron [00:23:31]

Yeah, that would be fantastic to be able to have other organizations model your spay neuter clinics and you know some of the other operational programs that you're doing. I think that would be really fantastic. I think there are a lot of folks out there looking for guidance, as to how to handle their community cat programs, how to integrate community cat programs in with their adoption programs, where they might have been used to dealing with fewer feral kittens, fewer cats with certain medical situations, you know, a diabetic cat, you know, feline leukemia positive cats. There are organizations that may not have dealt with those populations of cats and now they are. And you know, I think this the more information we can provide and encourage the better off, we're going to be. I have a question for you, about the access to care, lots of parts of the community are having a hard time. Spay neuter clinics are booking out months and months in advance and there's a shortage of veterinarians as well as technicians. Do you have any advice for folks that may be running a spay neuter clinic or any thoughts with regards to the shortage of especially here you are being a technician, you know, how we could help facilitate improving the situation.

Sarah Swanty [00:24:43]

Yeah. Well, we're running into that ourselves. We just had a couple of our techs leave and we're having a hard time filling those spots, and we just increased the pay rates for for our vet techs, which means we're increasing the pay rates across the board for organization. It is, it's it is what I can say, is that you can run a spay/neuter clinic and do pretty well financially. If it's, if you're if you're doing it, right. So we, of

course have all these other programs as part of our organization that I always joke about being, you know, like this black hole for money and our spay neuter clinic, even with our free spay neuter program and everything we've got going on, helps to fund those programs. So if anyone is ever interested in reaching out to me and getting some information seeing an example of our budget, how we build things out. I'm always happy to talk to people about that and share information because I'm super passionate about opening spay neuter clinics and there's just so much opportunity there and really you can do it in a way where you can offer a good salary to the employees while still making a huge impact in your community. If you do it right. And we're going to we're seeing, we're going to have to be competitive to get these veterinarians in and to get these skilled vet techs in, and we've got to increase the pay for people that work in our industry. We've known that for a long time, we've struggled with it forever, but it's really getting to the point of, you know, I'm hearing about shelters that are having to reduce their intakes because they, they can't get people to come in and do animal care. It's pretty worrisome.

Stacy LeBaron [00:26:13]

Yeah. It is really, it's interesting. I mean, it's been very challenging for people to get positions filled and, you know, keeping your employees and being able to offer benefits and there's just a lot, a lot of components to it and a lot of moving parts and I do feel like all around the country, there's a lot of challenges. I think there are even more significant challenges in rural areas of the country. And that's one of the areas where services are needed most unfortunately. So lots of challenges for animal welfare looking up ahead. I hate to do this, but you know, if folks are interested in finding out more about your organization, how would they do that?

Sarah Swany [00:26:57]

So people can find out more about our organization at SavingAnimalstoday.org or they're welcome to give us a call at 970-484-8516.

each out to me directly and my email is Sarah with an H dot Swanty [@savinganimals today.org](mailto:@savinganimals.today.org) (Sarah.swanty@savinganimals.org)

Stacy LeBaron [00:27:09]

Sarah. Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today?

Sarah Swanty [00:27:19]

Oh, I just; that this was really awesome Stacy, and I think you just brought up so many important topics in animal welfare and I feel really privileged to have been able to be here with you today. And I thank you for everything that you're doing for community cats.

Stacy LeBaron [00:27:32]

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

Sarah Swanty [00:27:38]

Awesome. I'd love to be here again. Thanks.

Kristen Petrie [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, 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 [00:28:11]

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