

## CommunityCatsPodcast\_Ep420\_Tuttle\_210907.mp3

**Kristen Petrie** [00:00:00]

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 Caron Tuttle. Caron is the President of Atascosa Animal Allies. She grew up with a passion for cats. She remembers vividly, as a child, accompanying her grandmother twice a day to feed feral cats in the small south Texas town of Freer, near the Mexico border. Caron presently has eight cats of her own, all rescues and all foster fails, which I will say is a foster success. She spearheaded the creation of a new rescue group in two thousand seventeen to save animals out of the Pleasanton, Texas animal shelter, when a prior group got kicked out of the shelter. With the city's urging, Caron and four other ladies stepped up and created the nonprofit animal welfare organization named Atascosa Animal Allies. The county she lives in happens to be Atascosa County. Say that one ten times fast. It was a sharp learning curve at first. In two thousand nineteen, the city hired two kennel techs to work with the dogs, freeing Caron up to help cats only. Up until that point, she was going to the shelter weekly and vaccinating all dogs and cats. The group's members quickly learned that sterilization is the only option to end suffering for cats. Sixteen point nine percent of the area residents live at or below the poverty level and cannot afford to sterilize their pets. Atascosa Animal Allies now has a robust TNR program and are subsidizing monthly clinics for area residents. None of the group's members are paid including Caron. Atascosa Animal Allies is a foster group of about twenty-five ladies and does not have a facility. All the cats that they take in are fostered in their homes. Through hard work, the group has partnered with many no-kill cat rescues in San Antonio and Austin, Texas. Many of the cats trapped are adopted as friendly strays or as barn cats. Since there is an overabundance of cats in Atascosa County, Caron transfers the overflow to no-kill shelters such as San Antonio Humane Society, Snipsa, which

is Spay Neuter Inject Project San Antonio, SCAT (Stray Cat Adoptions of Texas). And the hardship cases go to Austin Pets Alive or Wayward Whiskers. Caron is a certified trapper for the San Antonio Feral Cat Coalition, is part of Facebook groups SA Cat Rescue and ASPCA Feline Fostering for Shelters and Rescues, in which she networks with other rescue groups to save cats lives. She fosters the worst of the worst medical cases and passes along her knowledge to other foster providers in the group. A Trinity University graduate in business marketing, she markets the adoptable cats and kittens and finds them homes through the group's website [www.atascosaanimalallies.org](http://www.atascosaanimalallies.org), and social media. She does radio interviews, speaking engagements at schools, and local organizations, to educate the public about feral cats in the community and how to become a more responsible pet owner. Caron, I'd like to welcome you to the show.

**Caron Tuttle** [00:03:31]

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

**Stacy** [00:03:33]

Wow, what a journey you've had in just a short few years. This is incredible. Before we jump right into your bio and everything, first, share with our listeners. You know, how did you become passionate about cats?

**Caron** [00:03:44]

I grew up with cats. I've had a cat or cats for as long as I can remember. When I was a little bitty kid, there's always been cats around and I just love them. I mean, they just speak to me. And so I've always, they're always around. Whenever, wherever I'm at, wherever I go, when I go on vacation, there's cats that come up to me. It just is what it is.

**Stacy** [00:04:08]

You're a graduate, of business marketing degree. So you sort of went off to school, not necessarily thinking, oh, I'm going to be involved with taking care of cats all the time, you know. And often, sometimes people in this journey will say, oh, I always wanted to be a veterinarian, which, I never wanted to be a veterinarian, but some people thought that they would want to be a veterinarian. When you were in school, did you think you were going to be involved with helping cats?

**Caron** [00:04:32]

Never. It's so funny, you know, ten years ago, twenty years ago, if someone asked me, do you think you'll be doing what you're doing now, I would have laughed because I had no idea. But it's amazing the journey in life and where it takes you and I'm very satisfied with what I do.

**Stacy** [00:04:53]

So I'm going to ask you, because I look back at the years that I've been involved with helping cats since nineteen ninety-four. And I do feel like I can count on my hand, or maybe two hands, key events that happened that really, re-solidified my desire to continue to help cats in my community, across the Nation, get involved with projects mentoring other groups. Was there a key event that really said to you, I need to get involved, I need to do more than what I'm currently doing and how am I going to learn to do it?

**Caron Tuttle** [00:05:26]

My husband and I always rescued kittens or cats before I became involved in our group. And then about, I believe it was around June of twenty seventeen, I had been on Facebook and noticed a local rescue group that worked out of the local shelter here in Pleasanton, needing foster help. So, that was my chance. My husband and I talked about it, and they told me to go out to the shelter and pick one or two kittens, because there were so many at the shelter at that time, and they sent me pictures of some of the kittens. And my husband and I talked about it and he said, well, get this little cat, a little black-and-white tuxedo. He's, nobody's going to want that one. It looked really sad. So I went out to the shelter and I walked in there and mind you, it is an outdoor shelter. There's no walls in it. There is now but there wasn't back then and it was primarily a dog shelter, not a cat shelter. The cats were an afterthought. And we see that a lot in rescues, cats are just an afterthought. And I walked into the shelter. I walked through the dog, had to walk past all the dog cages, and I came to the cat area, which was actually the euthanasia room, that they put cats in that room, and all the kittens were stuck in one cage together. There was a couple of other old metal cages that had nursing mothers in. It was unbelievable to me. And so, I called my husband, I said, well, I see him. I'm going to get him, but there's another little black one that's with him. And then there's a mother and four, three babies. He says, well, just whatever you want to do. Just, just get what you want. So I wound up

bringing six cats home that day. That was my first chance at fostering and thank goodness I took, I had the mindfulness to take them to the vet before I brought them home. And they were all sick with one thing or another. And so I had to, I mean, round-the-clock treat them for Coccidia, Ringworm, Sarcoptic Mange and upper respiratory infections, but that totally changed my life. I mean, being able to help these animals, that's, that's my defining moment because that's what we wanted to do and now we were able to do it. But mind you, I was just a foster. That's all I was doing. So, so far, just fostering.

**Stacy** [00:07:52]

And how many years ago was that?

**Caron** [00:07:54]

That was June of twenty seventeen.

**Stacy** [00:07:58]

Not that long ago.

**Caron** [00:07:59]

No, it wasn't.

**Stacy** [00:08:04]

So, many of our listeners are in areas of the country where the environment you just described is something that we have not seen for quite a while. What is the state of the world for cats in Texas at this point in time, based on what you're seeing?

**Caron** [00:08:21]

There's a lot of euthanasia for cats. They get a bad rap. Dogs, it's easier for dogs, but for cats, and there's just so many of them and so many are sick, especially in Texas. I mean, like I say, we don't really have very harsh winters and so they reproduce all year round. So, even at the time when I started fostering, I was the only cat foster for that group. Everyone else fostered dogs. And so I said, I wanted to foster cats and they said that's great, we don't have a cat foster. So we see that in every rescue, in every town, every shelter. They're just, they're an afterthought.

**Stacy** [00:09:04]

So, before we started the recording, we were talking a little bit about one of the things that you have felt really important to convey to our listeners, and I'm a firm believer of it, which is really feeling the power that you're able to make a change within your own community. It sounds like before twenty seventeen, there wasn't much of a trap neuter return program in your area. Can you share a little bit about how you got that started?

**Caron** [00:09:27]

Yes, there was not a trap neuter return program in our area at all and most people still do not know what that even means. In twenty, I believe it was twenty eighteen, the Animal Control Officer started bringing in feral cats into the pound, and with no way out for them. No one could adopt them or anything like that. They had a building called a catio, which was approximately six foot by six foot, and he would literally put, he would trap these cats and put them in that open-air catio. And at one point, there was probably twenty to twenty-five cats in there. Some were feral, many were feral, some were female, some were male, some, there were kittens. It was just a hodgepodge of all these cats put into this area. And I had to go to the city and I told them, you can't trap feral cats and put them in with other cats, you can't do that. And there's no way for us to find places for these cats to go. You know, we don't have a place for them. So I went to the city and I convinced them that they needed to buy trap neuter return traps, the Tru Catch, which is what we started doing and trap. Many of the cats trap at people's homes that were complaining about all these cats, getting on their cars and everything else. Get them get them fixed, get them sterilized and they'd have to come back.

– *Start mid-roll advertising-*

**Stacy** [00:10:57]

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**Kristen** [00:11:59]

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

**Stacy** [00:12:05]

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](https://communitycatspodcast.com).

**Stacy** [00:13:08]

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](http://www.doobert.com) and go to the Fosterspace tab to get started.

*-End mid-roll advertising-*

**Caron** [00:14:02]

Now, if some of the cats were very tame, I could find, I could find homes for them. I could get them to rescues, I could get them adopted, but as far as the ones that were feral, we didn't really, we didn't have a place for them. Now I actually have a program. It's a barn cat program. And there are times where we'll have people take five to ten cats, maybe three cats, but we instruct them on, you don't just take them, throw them out. They have to be inside a kennel for three weeks minimum, four weeks is best. Get them used to being at that property because they're very territorial and then once that, those three to four weeks are gone or completed, then they can let them out. But it was, it was a big, a very big learning curve for the city of Pleasanton and they've worked with us. We have a wonderful relationship with the city of Pleasanton now and we have a robust TNR program. I want to expand it. Of course. I always wanted to, to be expanded, because there's just so many cats and last year, I believe, we, I believe it was around seven hundred cats that we spayed and neutered. That was including strays, it wasn't just ferals. This year we're on target for a thousand and of course, I would like to eventually hit two thousand or three thousand if we can.

**Stacy** [00:15:02]

What is the demand for your monthly clinics? I mean, are you turning folks away that want to bring in cats for the surgery?

**Caron** [00:15:10]

So how our clinic works, we have eight to eleven appointments weekly and those primarily are for ferals. Some are for friendly cats, but yes, we have people constantly. We have a waiting list and we beg the spay and neuter clinic, the low-cost spay and neuter clinic, to give us more appointments, if they can. And the other

day, they gave us, it was twenty- eight, twenty appointments in one day and then we were just trying to scramble to get enough cats. But it's, I mean, it's working. We have a waiting list and we get to people as quickly as we can. And then what we've done now is we are subsidizing a clinic for the community and they have to make the appointments. I posted, I just posted it today, our May clinic is opening. It will be on April the fourteenth. There is a place for twenty-eight cats and ten dogs. And all they have to do is click on the link, pay the copay, and take the animals up there and bring them back. So that's helping and it's getting the people in the community involved as well and more aware of the problem.

**Stacy** [00:16:20]

It seems like you're very connected with quite a few other organizations in Texas. Do you feel that you are all working collaboratively together?

**Caron** [00:16:27]

I have never felt that they were so much working, they, well let me take that back. They were working with us, but we were the ones begging because we have, there's so many wonderful places in San Antonio, but they're overwhelmed as well. Snipsa, in the spring, we can send them little kittens. They usually take kittens. They like the little long-haired kittens that are about six weeks old, but I have a window of about two weeks and then they're full. So we get them in as quickly as we can. They're wonderful. And Stray Cat Adoptions of Texas. We just took four cats today. We usually take between four and eight cats per week, but they've got their own problems. And so I always feel like we're the stepchild. It's like, can you please take more cats from us? But we have a very, very good working relationship with all of them. And we email, we call, text. It's great. And I don't know what I'd do without them because we have so many cats in Atascosa County. There's not enough people to take all of them so the overflow goes to San Antonio. And a lot of our cats, last year, we, I believe we got two hundred and twelve cats adopted and we transferred two hundred sixty-seven cats and that was primarily to the San Antonio, Bear County Metroplex, and they're going into apartments. There's a lot of people up there and a lot of apartments. And with COVID, we saw a surge in people, wanting animals, cats, especially cats. And so that's been a blessing.



**Stacy** [00:18:02]

So, if you had a magic wand and you could do whatever was needed to be done, in order to improve the lives for community cats in Texas or across the country, what would you do?

**Caron** [00:18:12]

I would, I would trap more cats. Get more cats sterilized. That's, that's the key. I think that people really want to do the right thing but in our area, the poverty level is so high. And they want pets, and the children want pets and they get them because they're on every street corner, literally. And then they realize when they grow up, when the cats or the dogs, either one, get to that point where they can have babies, they can't afford to have the surgery done. It's very expensive. It ranges anywhere from one hundred dollars to three hundred dollars to get a cat spayed or neutered and so that's a problem. They throw them outside. They reproduce. So, sterilization is key. I would like to have the money to be able to sterilize the cats. And the kittens are the ones, they're the ones that suffer on the streets, the most, I think. So that's a very important sterilization education, educating the public on, what, what to do, the right thing to do, and getting the people involved. The more people are involved, the happier they are when they see progress and see that they've done good for animals. It's a cycle. It's, you know, you helped their animals, then they feel better about themselves. They feel better about you or what you've done for them. They're very appreciative, but they feel better about themselves because they're stopping the cycle of suffering.

**Stacy** [00:19:40]

That's great. If folks are interested in finding out more about Atascosa Animal Allies, how would they do that?

**Caron Tuttle** [00:19:46]

Our website is [www.atascosaanimalallies.org](http://www.atascosaanimalallies.org) and we just got it revamped. It's a brand new website. It's a beautiful website. They can contact us there. My personal email address is [atascosaanimalallies@gmail.com](mailto:atascosaanimalallies@gmail.com). And we also have a Facebook page Atascosa Animal Allies rescue.

**Stacy** [00:20:13]

That's great. Excellent. Caron, is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners today?

**Caron** [00:20:17]

Well, considering I was a business major, and I, we own a business, and I never was involved in civic work just because I was so busy, not that I didn't want to. It was such a sharp learning curve when I got involved in what I'm doing and that means anybody can do it. And it's such a powerful thing to help the community and help the animals. You know, I always tell people when you're focusing on yourself and you feel sad or depressed, then get up and go do something to help another person or a help an animal. And so, I encourage everyone that listens to this podcast to be encouraged to get up, go find other rescue groups that you can help with, you can foster with, you can trap, that you can give money to or go buy dog food, or cat food, whatever it is, donate. And if you really feel a prompting, which is what my husband and I did, then start your own organization. It is tough. Just ask, keep asking questions. That's what I did. I just kept asking. I got on Facebook and I found every rescue group that I could find and started asking them questions until I learned, because I knew nothing when I started.

**Stacy** [00:21:35]

That's great. Caron, I want to thank you so much for being a guest on my show and I hope we'll have you on again in the future.

**Caron** [00:21:42]

I would love that. Thank you so much.

**Stacy** [00:21:45]

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** [00:22:14]

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