

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep421_Senser_210914

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[Intro] You've tuned in to the Community Cats podcast. Ready? (cat meows) Let's go. Welcome to the Community Cats podcast.

00:15

[Stacy] I am your host, Stacey LaBaron. I've been involved in 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 to improve your lives and how to improve your lives. you can turn your passion, her cats, into action.

[Stacy] Today, we're speaking with Hannah Sensor. Hannah started with Ruff Start Rescue in February of 2020 as the cat foster manager. She previously worked as a veterinary technician and has always had a passion for rescue and shelter medicine. Her first experience in a rescue was through an internship in high school and she has loved it ever since. Since then she has spent the past five plus years fostering and volunteering through local rescues. Her position as cat foster manager is to oversee all of the cats in the rescue. As a foster -based rescue, she manages everything from vetting to behavior or emergencies. She is the go -to person for all of their dedicated cat fosters. When their director, Azure Davis, started RSR, it was to help her community she grew up in rural West Minnesota. As the mission has expanded, so has their needs in helping animals, especially cats in their community. Their main focus is overseeing but adoptable animals and helping them thrive in their foster homes. Where her heart lies is local impound and hoarding cases.

01:42

[Stacy] Hannah, welcome to the show.

[Hannah] Thank you so much for having me.

[Stacy] So my first question to all of my guests is to share with us, you know, how did you become passionate about cats?

01:54

[Hannah] Of course. Well, I have been an animal lover, of course, my entire life. I was the little girl who was outside tracking down wildlife and wanting to be around animals always. So you could usually find me nose deep in like an encyclopedia of dog breed studying away from me.

[Hannah] I grew up with cats dogs rodents rabbits horses basically everything and I think my parents started fearing my freedom when I was young not because of being a teenager but bringing home stray cats and wild animals and all those kinds of things so when I first started

with Ruff Start, I took the position as the cat foster manager and of course I've loved cats forever and it's just something that I've fallen deeper in love with it ever since. -

[Stacy] So before you were with Ruff Start Rescue, you were a veterinary technician. You wanna share a little bit about what sort of education you had to become a vet tech?

02:45

[Hannah] Sure, so I did a little bit of schooling online with Penn Foster College. And then I was trained on the job for a few years and I really grew my education. So although I did not finish or get a degree in that sense, I was... trained on the job and learned so much from my peers, those of whom are or who went through the training and certification, and Minnesota being a non -credentialed state for veterinary technicians, you don't need to have your certification to be a technician. I was able to learn so much and just grow in that sense.

[Stacy] Can you tell me a little bit about Ruff Start Rescue, what sort of programs they offer, how long? have they been around?

[Hannah] Yeah, so Ruff Start Rescue was founded almost 10 years ago by our founder, Azure Davis in Princeton, Minnesota, which is about an hour west of the cities.

[Hannah] And Azure started at Ruff Start because she knew she needed help in her community. And she noticed growing up there that the need for animals around her was so great.

[Hannah] And being a little bit farther from the cities, there wasn't a lot of help. that was serving her community. And so that's where her heart started and lied in that part. And since then, we've been able to adopt out over 16 ,000 animals and help all over the country with different animals in need.

[Hannah] We have a wide range of employees going from education to grant management. We are a 5013C, so we do not get any funding from the state or federal government.

[Hannah] It's all individual grants, and that's how we operate. And they recently went from, and I'm part of this kind of group, from just a few employees to over 20 employees, paid full -time employees now who are running the business.

[Stacy] So do you have programs in addition to the adoption program, or are you solely focused on adoptions?

[Hannah] In what sense do you mean programs?

04:39

[Stacy] So do you operate a spay/neuter clinic for the public or do you do any wellness clinics or community outreach or educational programs, anything else other than adoptions?

[Hannah] So our main focus is adoption and their foster -based program, but we do also have an education program where we reached our volunteer education manager.

[Hannah] She reached over 60,000 children and adults throughout 2020. And so we're huge on education and animal welfare, especially being in a rural area, you know, there is not a lot of education behind some of the things we're so passionate about like spay and neuter, surrender, that kind of thing, you know, we want to keep animals in their homes.

05:24

[Hannah] And so that's a huge, huge part for us is we want to educate the people in our community. So besides that, like I said, our main focus is education. Down the line, of course, we would love to operate a wellness clinic.

[Hannah] We would also like to follow some of those animal welfare trends that we're looking into, like temporary boarding for people, or like I said, the wellness clinic, the spay/neuter programs. We do operate a small TNR program out of our surgical suite, but it's not something that we're able to really grasp like we would like, unfortunately, because of our lack of funding and grants and veterinarians and such, just like people all over the country right now.

06:04

[Stacy] So I'm gonna start taking a really deep dive in your foster program, because I think it's time for us at the Community Cats podcast to have a really foster focused conversation. I think with COVID, every organization has grown and expanded their foster care program. but you use the phrase Foster -based program. I don't know if you use that before COVID or if that's just a new term that you're using But can you define what a foster -based program means for your organization now?

[Hannah] Yeah, absolutely. So Foster -based for us means that all of our animals are kept in foster homes throughout the state. So Minnesota is very lucky to have some wonderful human societies and local impounds that adopt out cats and dogs and critters.

[Hannah] And unlike them, we do not have a brick and mortar shop where you can go and find your forever animal. So foster based to us means that we are keeping the animals in foster homes and adopting them out through the fosters.

[Hannah] So what that really entails is a gigantic community of people who are willing to serve others in their community. It definitely takes a special person to wanna connect with people who are looking to adopt and go into deep dives of backstories and helping these animals.

[Hannah] And so being that we are able to provide the education for fosters and volunteers to allow them to feel educated in adopting out these animals.

07:35

[Stacy] So you allow your foster homes to be able to adopt out the cats?

[Hannah] Yeah. So kind of how our process works is that we, of course, we're in charge of it over here, but once the application gets to the foster, we acknowledge that the foster knows that animal best. I mean, we can track them from a behavior or medical standpoint, but we just don't know them the way the foster does.

[Hannah] So we really, really trust in our fosters to be the best advocate for their foster animal. And so when they get a slew of applications like they do, you know, we ask them to contact and see would be the best fit for their animal.

[Hannah] And we really are working on as a whole, creating adoption to be more diverse for people, you know, we don't want to limit. And I think a lot of people, you know, they get misunderstood with rescue and they say well. "Well, you know, I can't adopt because I'm in an apartment or I don't have a fenced -in yard." Those are barriers that we're constantly looking to knock down because we don't believe that there should be any barriers to adopting an animal.

[Hannah] If you have the resources, the time, the money, and anything that you can provide for them, you can do it in the space you need. And say, "You have an apartment with a high energy cat." Well, we're going to help you find out the best way to please you." that cat and so you can both have a great relationship moving forward.

08:57

[Stacy] That's fantastic. As the foster home manager, define your job and how you spend your time.

[Hannah] Sure. So I basically, I oversee all of our cats and rescues. So we have anywhere from 200 to 300 cats and rescue at a time, so that means I'm operating all of those foster homes. And so I'm that go-to person who sets up vetting appointments. I set up anything that they need regarding supplies, medical needs, behavior needs.

[Hannah] And then I process that all the way up until adoption. And then I kind of hand it off to our adoption manager, who is the one that processes those adoptions. But I'm kind of my day to day looks like I'm hopping on emails right away in the morning.

[Hannah] And I'll usually have a slew of emails on concerns, you know, know, there's things, you know, we commonly see in rescue, my cat has worms, what do I do, that kind of thing. So my job is to really take over that portion of things and help ease those concerns and help get that cat ready for adoption. And once they are, then that kind of hands off to the application manager.

[Stacy] And I assume, do you do all of your veterinary care in -house, or do you work with private veterinarians?

[Hannah] So we do both and part of our program being in Princeton, Minnesota, is that we are about an hour out of the city and so it's a smaller community but the wonderful thing is that we have fosters all over the state and so we really try to cater to everyone around the state.

[Hannah] So we do have partner clinics that we use throughout the state that we will do basic wellness, vetting care, that kind of thing. However, all of our surgeons. operations are done with our veterinarian at our Princeton office.

[Hannah] So those are one of those barriers that we kind of ran into with COVID is that when the spay neuter band was put in place and the lack of veterinary care that we're all seeing throughout the entire country is that we just feasibly could not have surgeries be done at some of the places we were having them done at our partner clinics.

[Hannah] You know, they were backed. up months and they still are. So we ran into a little bit of a barrier with that, but we've been able to get into a flow of having all of our animals come for their spay neuter, their master mobiles, their dentals, their leg amputations, everything you need is at our office in Princeton.

[Hannah] And that's why we really rely on volunteers and our fosters to be able to bring their animals up to our clinic to help them, because it's definitely a... a feat. You know, we have people who will drive two, three hours to our clinic and wait there for the day. And so it's just wonderful to see everyone come together to help get these animals adopted.

11:29

[Stacy] How many foster homes do you have sort of at any given point? Sure.

[Hannah] So right now, I believe we have over a thousand active foster homes. So these are people that have fostered within the last year.

[Hannah] So once we kind of hit that year point, we usually will re-up on some training on new things that we do, but it doesn't mean everyone's always has an animal at that time, but we also have a FTA or foster to adopt program with our dogs where we have a lot of people who are looking to adopt and they're able to do that small trial run through our foster to adopt program.

[Hannah] So we reach a lot of people and have a lot of active foster homes.

12:04

[Promo 1] Give your feline friend protein -packed meals they'll crave with Smalls. Smalls is fresh, human-grade food for cats delivered right to your doorstep so you too can embrace your inner house cat. All cats are obligate carnivores. They need fresh protein-packed meals.

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[Promo 1] Try Smalls today for your cats and your household. Hooch loved it. Use OfferCo Community Cats at checkout for a total of 30 % off your first order at Smalls.com.

13:17

[Promo 2] Are you ready to be part of the solution for feral and stray cats in your neighborhood? But if so, then make sure to sign up for our next neighbor's video. 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 \$10, 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? feeding, providing winter shelter and more.

[Promo 2] 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.

[Promo 2] The two -and -a -half hour workshop is led by Susan Richmond, the Executive Director of Neighborhood Cats and Brian Cortis, Neighborhood Cats National Programs Director, to find out. out the date of the next workshop and sign up just visit [communitycatspodcast .com](http://communitycatspodcast.com).

14:20

[Promo 3] 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 -built specifically to solve this problem.

[Promo 3] Introducing Foster Space, powered by our friends at Doobert. Foster Space 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 -greet, adoption days, or anything else they need. There's so much more to check out. out. Sign up for free at [www.dubert .com](http://www.dubert.com) and go to the Fosterspace tab to get started.

15:13

[Stacy] What sort of cats do you handle? Are you able to adopt out special needs cats, or are you just primarily focused on adoptable young cats transported in from other states? You know, do you have folks that are, you know... to special needs? And I hate using that term, special needs. That's why I'm sort of struggling with my words here. But yeah, I sometimes call them strange, odd, old and dysfunctional.

15:47

[Hannah] So no, you, that's a really great question. So that's kind of where my focus lies is the strange, odd, dysfunctional. There are a lot of opportunities for these young kittens and adults to come into the state and be adopted, but that's not something that we do.

[Hannah] We are so focused on local that it's all that we can handle at this moment. So we actually, a majority of our animals, our owner surrenders or our cats, I'll say. And then right behind that is local impounds and right behind that are local strays. So that is just a huge portion of the animals that come in are just from our area, and our owners who are not able to take them. So although we will help with the occasional cat from the reservation who needs a leg amputation, it's not something that we're really focused on.

[Hannah] And being that we are a foster -based rescue, we do have these fosters who are equipped to take care of those neonatal kittens that were abandoned by mom on the farm, or the hyperthyroid cat who's three. pounds, or the FIV or the FELV positive cats. Those are the things that I love and thrive on. And being that I come from a medical background and was trained on the job, those are the cases I love to work with. And just to take these animals that, you know, might be disregarded in a shelter, or, you know, an owner can't afford to take care of them anymore.

[Hannah] Those are things we love to help with. And so, although we might see animals stay and rescue a little bit longer, that's a life that we saved from euthanasia. And so that's really important to me.

17:16

[Stacy] You had mentioned that your organization has like 20 full time staff members. So you're in charge of the foster care program, which actually sounds like more like you're in charge of operations to a certain degree. Are there other staff members also managing the foster homes or you, the responsible manager for those 1000 foster homes, which seems like a really large number of people to manage.

[Hannah] Right. So I don't have exact numbers on what percentage are cat fosters of those. We also run a very robust dog program. So we do have these other foster manager positions for our large, large and bully breed and then also small dogs too.

[Hannah] So that is a main focus of ours. But regarding cats, that's all me. That's all I, that's all I manage.

[Stacy] And then so you have 1600 adoptions a year. How many of those are cats?

18:05

[Hannah] So sorry, I was saying 16,000 since we started. And we adopted out 3,300 animals last year total. And about a third of those were cats.

18:17

[Stacy] So that's about 1,100 cats.

[Hannah] Well, yep, all the 1,400 cats that we adopted out last year.

[Stacy] Are there any special tools that you like to use to help manage your foster program?

18:29

[Hannah] Not necessarily, I mean, I run, we are really lucky to be able to work with a few of our adoption centers around the state. So that would be those PetSmart adoption centers.

[Hannah] And we also work with a wonderful cat cafe called the Cafe Meow in Uptown Minneapolis. And so we're able to reach people who we wouldn't normally be able to reach.

[Hannah] And a huge thing that we commend our local humane society and impounds for is that people are able just to go in and meet with the animal and figure out if they like them or not.

[Hannah] It's different when you're just meeting the animal online or looking at their pictures. So being able to utilize these adoption centers are so helpful for us. You know, the Cafe Meow where people can go and they know they're cat friendly and they can go and meet them, and help the rescue in that way and go to PetSmart and look at the cat and spend time with them.

[Hannah] Those are programs we really, really rely on, although that is the latter half of the adoption process. All of the animals will stay in rescue in their foster home until that process. So other than that, no, I mean, there's not a lot of programs that I use or anything like that.

[Hannah] I run a pretty mean spreadsheet. spreadsheet that kind of tracks over you know I have about 300 cats in rescue right now so it's a lot but email you know is our main main source of communication through us.

19:52

[Stacy] So you haven't crossed the bridge and used something like Shelter Love or Google Docs and I know of another foster -based organization that use an app called Crew so that then the foster homes can talk amongst them with questions and so that it sort of takes the bottleneck out of some communications because, you know, as you said, you know, they've got a question about worms or deworming and that kind of thing. And probably a lot of your foster homes have already dealt with that or maybe even having a buddy system where two foster homes can work together or something like that.

[Hannah] Yeah. No, we do not operate with any of those programs. I know our kind of management staff in that sense. sense, we're always looking to grow and operate since we grew so quickly, especially over COVID.

20:34

[Hannah] But we have a wonderful fosters page on Facebook. And Facebook is not my favorite platform to work with, but it's where we post our animals needing foster. And then we also have so many wonderful fosters who will post things in the fosters page, experiences, things that happen with their animal or happy things. my foster cat that was with me for three months got adopted or that kind of thing. So we have a really great community of fosters who are able to connect that way and that's really wonderful to see.

21:05

[Hannah] So, you know, sometimes people have some behavioral questions and they'll post that on that Facebook fosters page. And that relieves my time to which is super wonderful because although I'm happy to help with those things and that is my job.

[Hannah] There are so many people. who are able to help and those fosters who are able to take in Kat from Kat, they probably have a better idea, you know, of things to suggest or, you know, want to work with than I would even do. So it's wonderful to have kind of our core fosters who are so experienced and know our policies and that kind of thing that they can help other fosters and new fosters.

21:40

[Stacy] No, that sounds great. It really sounds like you're using that Facebook page as as your virtual shelter, so to speak, and virtual resource area. So I think that that's great. You know, looking down the road is Ruff Start Rescue, looking at all at having its own facility, or is it basically fully engaged with the foster -based program? Or, you know, is it working for the organization or does the organization feel like they're gonna need to do something physical down the road?

[Hannah] Yep, exactly. So we are actually in the middle of it. the process of looking for a brick and mortar location kind of closer to our cities.

[Hannah] And that we've worked with when we have talked to a bunch of different rescues and shelters in trying to provide those kind of spaces for people.

[Hannah] Since we've had such luck with our adoption centers and people wanting to go adopt on the spot, we want to be able to provide that too. too. So unfortunately with COVID kind of switching up everything, that was a major plan in the works before. And we have seen the need and the want for animals to be adopted through our community that we want it even more now.

22:49

[Hannah] I mean, there's so many hurdles that we've had to jump with coronavirus in the animal welfare industry that it's taken us back a few steps, but we're in the process of trying to...to get our bigger location where we can adopt out animals that way and where people can come and see and have a huge, you know, we'd be able to do boarding or, you know, taking animals quickly without, you know, having a foster commitment.

[Hannah] I mean, that part about being a foster based rescue is that we can't take any animals we don't have fosters for. And that is one of the really unfortunate things.

23:23

[Hannah] And so if there is an animal. a cat or dog in our community that desperately needs help, and we just don't have a foster home for it, we have to unfortunately say we can't take it. And those are one of the most heartbreaking things that we run into, is that as much as we'd love to help, we just cannot. And so growing our location and growing a space where we could say, yep, bring it here, we'll take good care of it, we'll take care of that wound on that cat's neck or something like that.

[Hannah] That's something we really wanna be able to help with. So we're growing at a rapid pace coronavirus. We had like 30 % more applications brought in and foster homes coming from out of nowhere, wanting to take these animals. So although it was something that we, obviously no one was expecting, coronavirus has done wonderful things for our program and we're really thankful that we were able to grow as we could and serve our community in that way during that time.

[Stacy] So during COVID, did you see a decrease in the number of intakes that you had coming into your program?

[Hannah] No, we saw a major increase because of COVID and everyone wanting to adopt.

24:29

[Hannah] I think everyone around the country saw this crazy increase of people wanting to adopt now that they're home. We had that. We had that huge incline. I mean, we had kittens. kittens, say we put a kitten up on the website, there were 12 applications within half an hour for this one single kitten. I mean, there are people who really, really wanted to adopt and were not able to. And that's something that the rescue and a lot of rescues can say that they didn't see.

24:56

[Hannah] We had some of our most unadoptable dogs in rescue being adopted. And it's not just because of COVID. but people were really wanting to take these animals into their home. And that was true with the fosters as well. Getting our message out about how you can be a foster, you do not have to pay for the medical, you don't have to pay for supplies.

25:19

[Hannah] All we need is that loving home for you to temporarily keep this animal in. And we could say, and I promise they're not going to be with you for long. You know, so that's something that was really cool for us to see. And just on that same side of things, you know, people in the community, they're saying, well, aren't people gonna wanna return their animals once they go back to work? And you know what?

25:40

[Hannah] We've actually seen less surrenders this year than we have any other year. And so that's really cool to see as well too.

[Stacy] Do you have any comments about the challenges of working in a rural part of the United States?

25:53

[Hannah] Yeah, there are a lot of challenges that we deal with. The main thing I would say is education. I mean, we run into a lot of people who do not have the same values that we do, and some of those values include spay and neuter programs. I mean, there's a lot of people who they don't mean to, but they have these barn cats that keep reproducing and they don't know any better.

26:15

[Hannah] And that's just the farm way of life. And so we totally acknowledge that and we want to help them open up. why we love working in our rural community because we can educate and we can help and we can provide TNR.

26:26

[Hannah] And we can help this part of the rural area that someone else might not be able to. There's not a lot of people further west than us that are able to help.

[Hannah] And so being in this exact spot that we're in, we're able to do so much more. And so, like I said, education. is a huge portion for us. And so having our education manager be able to reach out to local schools around us and teaching kids about the importance of animal welfare and things like spay and neuter is super important.

26:59

[Hannah] And so being that we're in this area, we also are really lucky to be, well, not that far from the city is about an hour, but we still have people who are wanting to help from this city is an even farther for animals.

27:12

[Stacy] So that's really great. - Excellent. Well, Hannah, if folks are interested in finding out more about Ruff Start Rescue, how would they do that?

[Hannah] Absolutely. Well, they can visit us on any of our social handles at ruffstartrescue.org, spelled R -U -F -F, and we'd be happy to have you over there.

[Stacy] And is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today?

[Hannah] You know what? Animal welfare and rescue can be really tricky. And so I think that seeing our community come together during this time of COVID and having people want to help is just a really wonderful thing to see.

[Hannah] And some of these people who said they never would foster an animal before are continuing to foster cat and dog again and again and again. And there are just so many lives. that we can save and so right now we're just so focused on helping our local community.

28:05

[Hannah] We'd love to keep working so hard that we don't have to help them anymore and we can help animals in different states and that kind of thing but right now we're so focused on helping our local community that we hope we don't have to sometime down the line.

28:22

[Stacy] That's great. Hannah I want to thank you so much for agreeing to be a guest on my show and I hope I'll have you on again in the future.

[Hannah] Thank you so much for having me. It's such a pleasure.

[Outro] 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.

[Stacy] 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 Podcasts. Podcasts, Google Podcasts, YouTube Stitcher, or wherever you listen to podcasts so you don't miss a single show.

28:54

[Stacy] Thanks for listening, and thank you for everything that you do to help create a safe and healthy world for cats. Did you attend our recent online Feline Leukemia Day? We hope you learned some new and surprising information from the presentations that will help you save more cats.

29:10

[Stacy] Events like Feline Leukemia Day would not be possible without the generous sponsorships of the following organizations. The Tompkins Foundation for Feline Leukemia Advocacy, Humane Network, and Vets Pets.

29:21

[Stacy] Would you like to support content that helps save feline lives? Please visit CommunityCatsPodcast.com and click on Support CCP to learn more about sponsorship opportunities.