

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep423_Langer_210928

00:00

[Intro] (upbeat music) - You've tuned in to the Community Cats podcast. Ready? (cat meow)
Let's go. (upbeat music)

[Stacy] Welcome to the Community Cats podcast.

00:15

[Stacy] I am your host, Stacy LaBaron. 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.

00:28

[Stacy] I hope these interviews will help learn how you can turn your passion for cats into action. And today we're speaking with Suzi Langer. Suzi is a veterinary technician with a soft spot for specially-abled animals.

00:41

[Stacy] Bidford is a cerebellar cat or a CH cat and she also has a blind cat, an epileptic rat terrier, a pug with a curved spine and swimmers syndrome,

00:52

[Stacy] a semi-ferral calico that someone stuffed into their mailbox, and Suzi is working to bust the stigmas surrounding specially-abled pets.

01:03

[Stacy] Suzi, I'd like to welcome you to the show.

[Suzi] Hi, thank you for having me. I'm excited.

[Stacy] So first and foremost, I have to ask everybody this question, you know, how did you become passionate for cats?

[Suzi] Well,

01:14

[Suzi] I have always had a soft spot for cats ever since I was little, but then a few years ago in 2001, 2014, a local shelter had contacted me saying that a particular young man was getting picked on at the shelter.

01:27

[Suzi] He had a rough go. It was his third time getting surrendered back to the shelter. They had asked me to take him as a, just a weekend pass to get him out of the facility.

01:38

[Suzi] And then the rest was history. I And we were on quite an adventure after that.

[Stacy] Sounds great.

01:49

[Stacy] So you were actually, you're relatively new in the cat space. Many people are like, "Oh, I've had cats since I was two years old." But it sounds like you're a relatively new, crazy cat person.

02:01

[Suzi] Yeah, I had cats growing up, but I've never had one that I needed a little bit of extra understanding in order to...to care for them. Not necessarily anything extra as far as resources,

02:14

[Suzi] but we were learning, Bifford and I, how to cope with one another, I guess, more or less.

[Stacy] So you are a veterinary technician. Is that new or have you been a vet tech for quite a while?

02:29

[Suzi] Well, I have no shame in admitting that my mother was right. When I graduated high school, I actually went to college to be a librarian, much to my mom's dismay because she apparently always knew that I should be a vet technician.

02:41

[Suzi] So when I finally decided that I wanted to go back to school to be a vet technician, I got the, "I told you so" look that you get from your mother, everybody knows the look. So that's been about five years now.

02:54

[Suzi] So relatively new, my clinic I'm with, I've been there for about three years. years So I'm still a baby technician. I guess is what they call me.

[Stacy] What part of the country are you in?

03:06

[Suzi] Northeast Ohio, so we're in the Youngstown area about 40 About an hour and 45 minutes from Cleveland.

[Stacy] What's the population situation like for animals in in that section of Ohio?

03:20

[Stacy] Are you dealing with overpopulation issues or are you pretty much dealing? with more of the special needs issues that we're about to talk about?

[Suzi] That's a great question. So in Youngstown we suffer from,

03:33

[Suzi] I don't want to say extreme poverty, but we have a very high unemployment rate and we do see that trickle down effect to our animals. I do see a lot of TNR cases.

03:45

[Suzi] We see a lot of it, colonies cats that we take care of. But I do see especially cats. The overpopulation of cats in the area is astronomical. It really is. We have a lot of organizations that try to come together to curb that,

03:58

[Suzi] but it's an uphill battle. We're working every day on it.

[Stacy] So let's talk about CH Kitties. Can you tell me what CH stands for and describe what this situation is for cats?

04:14

[Stacy] I'm not going to call it a disease. disease, but it's a different way of living.

[Suzi] Right, absolutely. And that's why we don't call it a disability. We don't call it special needs.

04:25

[Suzi] They're specially-able. They have just one extra thing that makes them unique. So CH cats are cerebellar hypoplasia cats. They are born with it. It is an underdevelopment of the cerebellum,

04:37

[Suzi] which is responsible for their fine motor skills and coordination. The best way I can describe a CH cat is it looks like somebody that had a few too many tequilas.

04:48

[Suzi] They kind of wobble around, they stagger, they look like little drunk men on a Saturday night. They range from mild to severe so mild would be if they're overly excited you might see a head twitch or you might see them kind of

05:04

[Suzi] maybe would have like a jump of the skin and involuntary muscle spasm. Severe would be to the point where they can't move at all. They need rather extensive care.

05:17

[Suzi] They might need help going in and out of the litter box. Bifford is actually categorized as moderate. So he staggers around, he bops around the house. He does use a litter box, so it might not be very graceful.

05:29

[Suzi] He does do it. So he's kind of falling in the middle of the spectrum there. CH does not get worse or get better. They do learn muscle memory. So when I adopted Bifford,

05:40

[Suzi] he could not get on the furniture. He couldn't really get around that well. But as time went on, and we did exercises and physical therapy, he's able to pull himself up onto things now. So he's a little bit more independent than when he started out.

05:53

[Suzi] But they don't feel any different. They're not suffering. They're not in pain. It's not contagious. I get that question a lot. But they have a good quality of life. They can live just as long as any other cat.

06:04

[Stacy] So you said that they, you know, don't have this great muscle control and they look like they're kind of a drunken cat walking around and kind of banging into things or whatever. I mean, how do other cats react to a CH cat?

06:17

[Stacy] Do they get scared of them or do they get intimidated? Are there personality issues or are CH cats adaptable with cats that don't have CH?

[Suzi] That's a great question. They are absolutely able to be adopted with other cats that are CH or non -CH.

06:33

[Suzi] In our house, we have a blended house of misfit toys, I call it. So the cats that I have, two of my cats, they don't have any special needs.

06:43

[Suzi] They treat Bifford like any other cat. They play, they pick on him. They're just like siblings. My one cat, Bart, he is blind. He's partially blind.

06:54

[Suzi] He's missing his left eye. We had to have it removed due to herpes virus. He does have severe ulceration on the right eye. Him and Bifford are inseparable. They did not come together.

07:05

[Suzi] Bifford is ten now. Bart is four. So they... don't have any issues. They bicker like brothers, they cuddle like brothers, they'll play together.

07:16

[Suzi] I don't think they see a difference in each other.

[Stacy] When we were talking before, we hit the record button, we were talking about sort of the thoughts and the ideas or preconceived notions that rescues our shelters,

07:28

[Stacy] as well as veterinary practices, may have some preconceived notions about CH as well as other situations that our, you know, cats come into our programs with.

07:40

[Stacy] And so, you know, thinking about that, you know, what would you say to organizations that are faced with a CH cat and, you know, trying to convince them rather than giving up on the cat and deciding to euthanize that cat,

07:55

[Stacy] you know, why should they give that cat the chance to be adopted into a house? and from a veterinary practice? You know, why would they not want to work with that CH cat?

08:06

[Suzi] So I can give you a specific example About six months ago. We had a cat come in on an emergency. He was a male cat. He was blocked as we were treating him.

08:17

[Suzi] I noticed he was having some Jerky twitch like movements and I thought it was due to the pain medication due to him being blocked. So as I was talking to the owner,

08:29

[Suzi] she said, "Yeah, I've had him for six years. "We've seen three different doctors. "Nobody could tell me really what's wrong with him." And I said, "Ma'am, I think I know "what's wrong with your cat." And we ended up finding out that he was a CH cat as well.

08:41

[Suzi] So I don't know if it's not, if it's necessarily that vet clinics don't wanna take on CH cats. I feel, in part, it is due to they don't understand them.

08:53

[Suzi] CH cats are becoming more relatively well -known and a bit more understood, but there are still some old school veterinarians out there that unfortunately look at at CH cats and cats like Bifford as,

09:06

[Suzi] you know, the most humane thing to do for them is to euthanize them. And that's, that's an old school way of thinking. And that's definitely a stigma that we are working towards because that's, that's a true at all. And unfortunately,

09:16

[Suzi] shelters also take that stance. They might think that the risk financially is too much to take on and that they would require more care,

09:27

[Suzi] they would require more resources from the shelter standpoint. So economically speaking, the most realistic thing for them to do is to euthanize, but that's also not true. So that's kind of where our goal is that to talk to veterinary professionals,

09:42

[Suzi] rescues, and other cat organizations to try to talk them through why CH cats are just as deserving of loving homes as any other cat.

09:54

[Suzi] And Bifford, I tell people he's the best cat because every day I hear people, clients talk to me about Suzi, I don't want my cat on the counter, I don't want him pulling the furniture,

10:04

[Suzi] what am I going to do? Bifford is the best dude. He doesn't get on the counter. He'll crawl in the furniture, but he can't claw it. I mean, he is the best of all worlds. He purrs and plays in cuddles,

10:14

[Suzi] but I don't have to worry about him knocking over Thanksgiving dinner or eating my cooked food. So that's kind of where we're at. We just wanna talk to people about,

10:26

[Suzi] they're amazing. They're resilient and we have a lot to learn. learn from them. We really do.

[Promo 1] Give your feline friend protein -packed meals. They'll crave with smalls.

10:38

[Stacy] 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.

10:49

[Stacy] Conventional cat food is made with profits in mind using low quality, cheap meat -pride products. grains, and starches coated in artificial flavors. Smalls on the other paw is made with cats in mind.

11:01

[Stacy] Smalls develops complete and balanced recipes for all life stages with leading cat nutritionists. Starting with human grade ingredients like you or I would find at the market, Smalls recipes are gently cooked to lock in protein,

11:14

[Stacy] vitamins, minerals, and moisture. No room for fillers, no need for flavoring. Better quality ingredients mean a product. better, healthier life for your cat. Since switching to Smalls, cats have experienced improved digestion and a less smelly litter box,

11:26

[Stacy] softer and shinier coats, plus better breath. Try Smalls today for your cats and your household. Hooch loved it. Use offer code COMMUNITYCATS @ checkout for a total of 30 % off your first order at Smalls.com.

11:40

[Promo 2] 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,

11:54

[Stacy] 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.

12:05

[Stacy] We'll cover getting along with neighbors, preparations for trapping, trapping its including entire colonies at once, feeding, providing winter shelter, and more. Take advantage of the interactive format,

12:17

[Stacy] 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.

12:28

[Stacy] 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 the date of the next workshop and sign up just visit communitycatspodcast.com.

12:43

[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,

12:56

[Stacy] so many organizations struggle to maintain hundreds of animals and fostering. homes. If only there was a system that was custom -built specifically to solve this problem. Introducing Foster Space,

13:06

[Stacy] 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,

13:21

[Stacy] and organizations can schedule fosters for meet and greets, greets, adoption days, or anything else they need. There's so much more to check out. Sign up for free at www.dubert.com and go to the foster space tab to get started.

13:36

[Stacy] So you made a comment about it not being more money to have a CH cat. So if I had a CH cat and brought it into my veterinarian,

13:47

what sort of tests would they recommend that we do or vaccines or is it anything different than your average cat? Or how do we convince our community that having a CH cat isn't gonna cost us more than what I would call your everyday cat?

14:06

[Suzi] So I tell everybody there is no concrete test to rule out cerebellar hypoplasia. You can go to a neurologist or two specials to have an MRI done to see the measurement of a cerebellum,

14:21

[Suzi] but I tell people that's nice, but it's not always realistic and it's expensive. You know, I'll be honest, I didn't take Bifford. I could not spend that kind of money. I do always talk to people about if you didn't get your CH cat as a baby or you know,

14:39

[Suzi] a lot of people. say, well, he just started doing it or he's sort of getting worse. I always tell them to go to their veterinary and to roll out other things, you know, head injuries,

14:50

[Suzi] toxoplasmosis. There's a few other things that they can roll out first before just kind of process of elimination to CH. Bifford, in his case, he was a bottle baby.

15:01

[Suzi] His mother had rejected him when he was about nine days old. But the rest of the litter also had CH. So that's how it was kind of cut and dry for me because I knew that the others had it.

15:13

[Suzi] The only thing I tell people different that I do for Bifford and I talk a lot about is you can actually get a CH cat if you vaccinate a pregnant cat with a modified live virus of the FRCP.

15:28

[Suzi] So if you give them a modified live feline distemper vaccine, there's a very strong chance that one or all of the unborn kittens will develop CH. So that's the one thing I do talk a lot about to rescues and to vet clinics to always check,

15:42

[Suzi] you know, do you have a modified live FRCP vaccine or not? But as far as any other maintenance goes, I don't do anything more for Bifford that I don't do for all of my other cats.

15:55

[Suzi] Routine diagnostics, dental cleanings. A lot of people say, I'm sure being a CH cat, he has had terrible luck with his teeth. And he did,

16:06

[Suzi] but it was more in turn because the years before I adopted him, his other families didn't get him the vet care he needed. So it wasn't necessarily that he suffered from dental issues due to CH.

16:19

[Suzi] He just had extensive periodontal disease that needed to be addressed. But he visits the vet just like the other cats and he doesn't go anymore or any less. So I tell everybody,

16:30

[Suzi] do not let that stop you at all. And I don't do anything different at home either. He doesn't have anything different as far as a litter box goes. I do things differently because I have no shame in admitting I am a helicopter pet parent.

16:44

[Suzi] So Bifford has a Rubbermaid container that I have made with a whole cutout just so he can have a little bit more space but that's not absolutely the necessary thing to do.

16:57

[Suzi] It's just I want him to be comfortable so that's why I do it but it doesn't mean that every CH pat needs it.

[Stacy] I know with diabetic cats and renal failure cats there are a lot of support groups sort of out there on Facebook.

17:10

[Stacy] and that kind of thing. Are there support networks out there for CH cats?

[Suzi] There are, there are. So when I first got Bifford, I will admit I knew absolutely zero about CH.

17:22

[Suzi] I was very panicked the whole weekend he was home. I said, I'm just, I need to wrap him in bubble wrap because I am stressed watching him and weave off and bumble around. So I reached out there.

17:34

[Suzi] there are a few cerebellar groups on Facebook that have a huge network of just amazing pet parents that absolutely came to my rescue, which I'm forever grateful for.

17:46

[Suzi] I also found that there are CH transport groups. So if there's a rescue that has a CH cat or somebody unfortunately has to re-home their CH cat, these women,

17:57

[Suzi] they're fantastic, they come together and they will. drive several states to get the CH cat from point A to point B. So there's the definite group out there of CH pet parents that is the determining factor as to why I did this,

18:12

[Suzi] because everybody I talked to told me the same thing, that when they went to a vet, the vet recommended they euthanize them. When they went to a shelter and talked to them about their cat, they recommended euthanizing.

18:23

[Suzi] So I just felt there was a need for more education and advocacy for special needs cats. And that's kind of why we are all banding together, to bring better awareness.

18:37

[Stacy] Do you have a general sense of how many CH cats are out there?

[Suzi] That's a good one. So I don't, only because there are not really any concrete statistics,

18:48

[Suzi] because a lot of times, rescues or shelters or community animal agents, they'll euthanize them, mainly because I feel like it's feared,

19:00

[Suzi] they don't understand exactly what it is. I've had people that have looked at Bifford and had thought he was rabid. I have had people look at him and accused me of hurting him because they said clearly he had to have had a head injury.

19:13

[Suzi] So I think it's just a misunderstanding. So there aren't really any cut -and -dry statistics out there, but I'm hoping in 10 or 15 years we could change that.

19:25

[Suzi] Another one is anesthesia. I get that question a lot, CH-Cats and anesthesia. There are no studies or, you know, disputes that CH -Cats can't have a certain type of anesthetic agent.

19:38

[Suzi] You'll see a lot people online will say don't give them ketamine, anything injectable, which is true, but as a veterinary technician, I would say I wouldn't give an injectable anesthesia to any cat because the recovery is for harsh.

19:54

[Suzi] They just don't wake up as smoothly, they're just suffering a little bit, but no, there's not really any staff out there that can tell me how many there are.

20:05

[Suzi] are in the world.

[Stacy] You know, in addition to CH, you know, I do an online feline leukemia day. I personally, I don't even bother putting FIV in that category of anything special.

20:19

[Stacy] And, you know, when we have diabetic kitties, we have, you know, other kitties, kitties with heart issues, you know, so they need to get their, you know, ultrasound.

20:29

[Stacy] once a year or every six months or something like that. Part of your goal is outreach, spreading the word. Do you have specific plans? Is there a website that you've put together to help educate folks or in terms of like over the next two to three years,

20:47

[Stacy] what are you really thinking about how to spread the word on CH across the nation and beyond around the world really?

[Suzi] So we are doing a few projects at the moment.

20:59

[Suzi] We do have a website, you guys, to check them out at PresidentBifford.com. We're on the social media, Facebook and Instagram. Currently, we are making carrier tags that are brightly colored. They are vinyl tags that say,

21:10

[Suzi] "Ask me about my handy cat" or "Ask me about my special ability." We do make cerebellar tags specifically that we mail out for free as a courtesy to people.

21:20

[Suzi] and especially in a world where most vet clinics right now are curbside, it's scary. We had a young lady that emailed us saying that her cat went to her vet, the vet knows the cat very well,

21:31

[Suzi] but the technician and the assistant did not know this cat. So upon presentation, they thought this cat was having a seizure, rush him in, they were clipping in for Abby Catherner,

21:42

[Suzi] the whole nine, and the vet said, "No, no, wait, wait, wait." this cat, we know this cat." So my goal there is to hope, you know, if you see a brightly colored tag that says, "Ask me about my Cerebellar cat," or "Ask me about my special ability," that will open up the dialogue with vet professionals and pet parents about their special cat.

22:01

[Suzi] We also send out informational packets so anybody that emails and says, "You know, I had a really rough time at this particular vet clinic," I think they can really benefit from learning a little bit about them. I will mail to them free of charge an informational booklet that talks about the different anesthesia practices that the animal association recommends.

22:23

[Suzi] We talk about the varying degrees of CH, what you could do differently, and just what other illnesses and injuries you can roll out before concluding they are CH cats.

22:33

[Suzi] So, we send them those out. We sent about 15 packets yesterday and so far we started the carrier tag program in January and we've sent out 250 tags so far.

22:44

[Stacy] That's great. That's excellent. Congratulations on that.

[Suzi] The fur, I don't, oh, we're excited. I am very excited about that. We sent, our furthest has gone to Australia and India but we have sent them all over the United States and into Europe.

22:58

So I'm really, I am very excited.

[Stacy] That's great. So if folks are interested in accessing any of that information or finding out more about the work that you're doing how would they do that

[Suzi] They could visit our website at presidentbifford.com we are on Facebook and Instagram you could just type presidentbifford into the search bar and he'll come up and you could contact us through our website and if

23:20

[Suzi] you want to carry your tag you can also click the link. We also have a math on our way of a collection of CH friendly veterinarian clinics. So you can actually go to our site,

23:31

[Suzi] look at the map and senior area. If there are any clinics that are well versed that have either treated CH cats or personally had CH cats.

[Stacy] That's fantastic. That's really great. Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today, Suzi?

23:44

[Suzi] I do. I do. Don't let the word special needs or special ability turn you off from giving these guys a chance. If I would have years ago when they stole me Bifid with special needs,

23:58

[Suzi] if I would have let that stop me, I wouldn't have fallen in love with my best friend. I mean, he's the sweetest, most affectionate little boy and I could not picture him sitting in the shelter,

24:09

[Suzi] waiting for somebody to take him home. So it was the best decision I ever made. It really was.

[Stacy] That's great. Susie, 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.

24:20

[Suzi] Thank you so much. I had such a good time.

[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.

24:31

[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, Google Podcasts,

24:42

[Stacy] 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.

[Promo 4] Did you attend our recent online Feline Leukemia Day?

24:56

[Stacy] We hope you learned some new and surprising information from the presentations that will help you save more cats. Events like Feline Leukemia Day would not be possible without the generous sponsor sponsorships of the following organizations. The Tompkins Foundation for Feline Leukemia Advocacy,

25:10

[Stacy] Humane Network, and Vets Pets. 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.