

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep424_Hassen_211005

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

[Stacy] Welcome to the Community Cats podcast.

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[Stacy] I am your host, Stacey 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.

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[Stacy] I hope these interviews will help you to learn how you can turn your passion for cats into action. Today, we're speaking with Kristen Hassan. Kristen is the Maddie's American Pets Alive Director overseeing the Humane Animal Support Services, otherwise known as Haas.

[Stacy] She formerly served as the Director of Pima Animal Care Center. Pima's county's only open admissions animal shelter, which takes in 17,000 homeless cats, lost and abandoned pets annually and serves 15,000 animals through animal protection and outreach services.

[Stacy] Outside the shelter, Kristen has developed partnerships to build a community outreach program focusing on providing resources for pets owned by people facing homelessness and extreme poverty.

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Kristen also presents and writes regularly on a variety of subjects including breed labeling, reduction of shelter intake, innovative foster care, and social media for animal welfare leadership.

01:22

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

[Kristen] Thanks so much for having me.

[Stacy] So before we dive in into all the work that you do, and I'm so programmed into saying Haas rather than the whole thing and your bio, I kind of jumped right into it before we get into all those details of all the different things that you've been doing over the last like 18 months or so. First and foremost, tell me, you know, how did you become passionate about cats?

01:42

[Kristen] Well, when I was a little kid, we always had cats. And my first cat actually was an FIV positive cat. And I think that we ended up euthanizing him.

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[Kristen] And we learned much later that that wasn't at all necessary. And at the time the vet said he might be having behavioral issues because of the FIV or something.

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[Kristen] And it wasn't until much later I went to work in an animal shelter. that had a very, very high euthanasia rate. And we went into a hoarding case with, gosh, about 200 cats.

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[Kristen] And it wasn't your typical hoarding case, but the urine and ammonia was so bad, we had to wear gas masks. And a lot of the cats had been inbred. There were a lot of strange, stereotypical behaviors.

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[Kristen] I had never seen anything like it. And it was, the cats had never been out of the apartment and had lived with one person and what really struck me is they were all around our legs purring and laying on their backs and trying to get affection and attention.

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[Kristen] And it was really life -changing experience because you could just look around the room and you could either see 200 cats or you could see like 200 little souls with all different personalities.

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[Kristen] And so that was sort of the beginning of my work with cats. And I worked, last thing I'll say, as I worked in the shelter I worked in was Capital Area Humane Society, which is in central Ohio. And it had a very early TNR program.

[Kristen] I think one of the earliest, this was the late 90s, and officers were actually trapping cats, bringing them in and releasing them.

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[Kristen] And so when I went on to work in other shelters, people thought this was crazy and it was just always normal to me that you would do that.

[Stacy] Well, that's really interesting that you... say that because that's, I always say, I've been born and bred with TNR too. When I started back in 1994, TNR was, it was just the given. It was the go -to thing that you did for cats that were outside that you were feeding in your backyard.

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[Stacy] You would just put your dog house up there and you'd put a little heater in there if you wanted to really give it a cushy environment or whatever and you had TNR cats. And back in those days, you were doing 20 or 30 cats in the backyard.

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[Stacy] Nowadays in New England, two to four is pretty much the standard fare, but back then in the '90s, it was a pretty large group. But we never thought about trapping and euthanizing the cats, it was just what we did, even though it was a relatively new practice, but it just seemed like that other

option had been taken off the table because it had been tried so many times, and the cats just came back.

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[Stacy] Not the same cat. cats, different cats, but cats still came back and caused the same issues. And so it seemed like in Massachusetts, they kind of gave up on that option.

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[Stacy] Yeah. So I don't know if you found that in Ohio and then, well, you moved away from Ohio and went to other places. Did you work with organizations that didn't necessarily support Trapnuder Return?

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[Stacy] Did you have to convince them to start a program?

[Kristen] Yeah. I worked in... Yeah. So I left it. Animal Welfare because as I said, the shelter I was working for had a very high euthanasia rate at the time and it was fairly traumatic as a young professional.

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[Kristen] What I saw and witnessed in my, I think I worked there for like six months and, so I went on to have an entirely different career and didn't come back to the field until 2012 and working for the Fairfax County Animal Shelter in Virginia and Virginia has restrictive laws so you can't intake and release cats.

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[Kristen] We couldn't perform TNR. And so we had to have all of these strange workarounds in order to be able to and sort of subversions of these antiquated laws in order to be able to TNR.

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[Kristen] And so unfortunately we ended up taking in a lot of particularly non-social cats. And struggling, our say our life saving rate was something around 80%.

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[Kristen] But at the time we had to have all of these I worked there, it was kind of taken for granted that non -social cats would come in and would be killed. And we worked over the time we were there to change that and did somewhat normalize TNR, but those obstacles made it really, really hard.

[Kristen] It was always sort of like we were doing something wrong and the community approach, the community's feelings about it reflected those policies and laws.

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[Kristen] And so you can kind of see... the community criticism about TNR was quite strong.

[Stacy] So one of the things that I've been a strong proponent of is something called the community cat pyramid that I've created, which really tries to help people be able to focus on sort of how to impact the level of population in a community of cat population over population and really understanding that one of the key reasons we do, we may have a lot of. of cats out in the community is because people don't have access to affordable spay neuter services for their cats.

[Stacy] You know, what's been your exposure with regards to access to care within the community, especially enabling folks that have cats that may not be spayed and neutered and helping them to get their cats spayed and neutered?

[Kristen] Yeah, well, I went on after Fairfax to work in Austin, Texas. in the open admission shelter there and then Tucson, Arizona, the open admission shelter there. They're both communities that have relatively high populations of free roaming cats and dogs and relatively high percentages of unaltered animals.

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[Kristen] But luckily in both the communities, spay/neuter was readily available and was free or very, very low cost. In Austin, we have a Mansapet and some other groups sent in.

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[Kristen] In Tucson, the county actually subsidized Spaniard so people could access it quite easily. The thing that I think about every time I think about this is there's always a line of people that was two to three times as long as we could ever serve and it's a real challenge when you.

[Kristen] I think when you come down into the Southern cities and trying to do the volume. that's needed and that people want, people want their animals to be vaccinated and sterilized.

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[Kristen] But we're asking them to do things like, particularly in Tucson, we would ask them to stand in line for four hours or be there at 6:30am. And, and so I think that we have some changes to make there if we really want to support people in deciding what access means.

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[Kristen] But we worked with best friends and Tucson. to do a TNR program with cats and kittens and made a big impact on our overall intake.

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[Stacy] Yeah, I mean, I think that that's, you know, it's one piece of the puzzle for creating a humane community for cats. And one of the pieces of the puzzle too, and many of the folks that attend the educational programs that I put on really have no affiliation with an organization.

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[Stacy] They are just, they're out there, they're trapped. cats, they're paying for the surgeries on their own, they're learning on their own. So, what's the role of a shelter with regards to cats as well as us as individuals, just sort of wanting to help the cats in our communities, turning your passion for cats

into action? That's my tagline. Do we have to be affiliated with an organization or should we and can we be doing this just on our own?

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[Kristen] That's a great question. And I, it's our hope that American Pets Live in Human Animal Support Services that the future of sheltering means that we turn the entire community into the animal services so that the animal services can just help those animals that truly need to be taken in to save their lives.

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[Kristen] And why it's so important that folks are out there doing trapping, doing carrying of cats is because if, if you've had... been behind the scenes, behind the intake department, behind the admissions department, behind that counter, there is a whole world and especially in high volume shelters, it is fairly devastating the number of animals that come in at need.

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[Kristen] And when I was in Tucson, we were, we dealt with more hoarding cases than anywhere I've been and we don't really know why, but it's about 1 ,000 animals a year. The vast majority were cats coming out of hoarding cases.

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[Kristen] Those animals truly needed to come in to the shelter. And we had a lot of innovative ways to bring them in. We weren't bringing them in en masse. And I can talk a little bit about that in a minute. But the reason that it's so important that folks are out there doing TNR and caring for cats and doing the work on their own is because every cat they do that they help is one fewer cat that's coming into the shelter.

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[Kristen] When we talk about capacity for care I don't think about it necessarily in terms of cage space you can always set up a few crates. I think about it in the time we can spend helping animals get out of that system and when we hit these capacity levels which often happens with cats in the spring and summer it becomes really hard to focus on those cats who really need us like the 9-year-old, and for some reason, the 7-9 year-old cats really, really need help. I think a 14 -year -old cat sometimes is easier to get out. And cats with FIV or cats with FELV, cats that really need our help to get out.

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[Kristen] Every person that's out there in the community is-- they don't know it, but they're helping us fulfill the mission of saving the lives of the animals who enter in. We really never get to say thank you, so thank you to everyone who's doing that work.

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[Stacy] You know, one thing that I have felt in my mind is that we have tried to solve our cat problems and I'm putting problems in quotes because I think of them more as challenges or you know different scenarios in a dog way.

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[Stacy] So you know we have built shelters to hold dogs and they were usually originally housing our dogs and we have them in their contained environments and we have looked at our programs for cats in a contained environment that way rather than thinking sort of outside of the box as you're talking about utilizing the community as a resource to be able to provide better services, supplies, medical treatment, overall care to those cats in a different environment and it's not in this like monitored, caging environment.

[Stacy] You know, one of the things that I've always wanted to do is just to make sure that you have a safe environment and that you have a safe environment and that you of like let's take all what we've learned in the past and like throw it away and let's start from scratch and and let's understand the cat let's think about the behavior of the cat let's think about you know how we as people react to cats and the different personalities of the cats and trying to build something up from scratch

[Stacy] One of the pieces during COVID that really came out was when everybody pushed all their animals out in foster care. I think people discovered how well cats do in a foster care environment versus the sheltering environment.

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[Stacy] Even though you might have the most beautiful free roaming shelter space out there, going into that foster environment is by far a much better option for cats. And do you feel that that's going to stick with us as a community?

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[Kristen] You know, yeah, and it's been funny to do this work in, in open admission shelters because there's been a real reticence in terms of when it comes to sending cats to foster with this idea that somehow it's traumatizing to move them to a different environment, particularly for short-term foster, which we really don't have very much research on. And we saw during COVID, all of these cats going to foster and you could just, you could take the image of a cat in a shelter and you could take all of these images we were getting and you could, you didn't need to guess which one was in a shelter because you could see that by language the expression in their eyes it was completely different and being in a small cage is really frightening and I think traumatic for a lot of cats and and added on to that most shelters those cats are going to be exposed to dogs and those cats are going to be in a small confined space when they're exposed to dogs and lots of people it is so stressful and so we started to just say everything out to foster.

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[Kristen] And we had the lowest in-shelter death rate we had ever had. And people don't talk very much about this, but cats die in shelters just from being stressed. And it is very hard to monitor whether they're eating, especially in a shelter like mine that might have had five to 600 cats in care at any time. And I have walked in too many times in a cat just because we weren't monitoring the feeding appropriately.

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[Kristen] A cat would be deceased and this is not a special thing because I was a bad shelter director. This is happening everywhere. People just started talking about it. And so I set out

when I really went into these shelters with high admissions of saying no cat was going to die from stress in a shelter.

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[Kristen] And that's a very different approach. But just by saying that, like just by saying that you have to start doing everything differently. You have to group house your animals that are coming in together. You have to start respecting that bond and pair sometimes actually do need to stay together, which as a government shelter director took me about six years to get to that realization. You have to get them out quickly. We went, our goal was like two days in, they stayed in a cage for no longer than a couple of days and then they were pushed into a group room.

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[Kristen] And we achieved it. I don't think my last year there, we had one die of stress, but it took significant changes. And cats are so quiet, and I'm sure a hundred other people in this practice have said this, but they are so quiet that they silently suffer.

[Kristen] And so it is our responsibility to pay more attention and to rethink this whole system 'cause it isn't built for cats. And it's not necessary for most cats.

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[Kristen] People need to stop building shelters with all of this cat housing. They need to have a medical ICU. They need to have a place for income. incoming neonatal kittens. And then they need to have some space for those true geriatric cats that really need a place to go while they're waiting for foster, a sort of foster hold center.

[Kristen] But other than that, we need to stop having all of these stray hold kennels for cats who are not necessary and they don't solve the problem at all. The people who you just referenced who are trapping cats, who are doing TNR, who are keeping their eye out for that one sick cat who needs help, that's who's doing the work. that we need to do a lot more of

15:34

[Promo 1] (upbeat music) - 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.

15:47

[Stacy] They need fresh protein -packed meals. Conventional cat food is made with profits in mind, using low quality, cheap meat fry products. grains, and starches coated in artificial flavors.

15:58

[Stacy] Smalls on the other paw is made with cats in mind. 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, vitamins, minerals, and moisture. No room for fillers, no need for flavoring. Better quality ingredients can be used. a better, healthier life for your cat.

16:22

[Kristen] Since switching to Smalls, cats have experienced improved digestion and a less smelly litter box. Softer and shinier coats plus better breath. Try Smalls today for your cats and your household.

16:33

[Kristen] Hooch loved it. Use OfferCo Community Cats at checkout for a total of 30 % off your first order at Smalls .com.

16:42

[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, but please check our website for exact dates.

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[Stacy] 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. trapping itself, including entire colonies at once, feeding, providing winter shelter, and more.

[Stacy] 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.

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

17:43

[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.

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[Stacy] 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 Foster Space, powered by our friends at Doobert.

[Stacy] 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 greets. greets, adoption days, or anything else they need.

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

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[Stacy] You mentioned you've had experience as the head of a municipal shelter. You've been involved with NACA. And within the last year, they've come out with a statement with regards to community cats.

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[Stacy] Would you like to share part of that?

[Kristen] Sure, the National Animal Control Association, which I sit on the board of, had not previously really taken a strong statement about cats. We had offered TNR as one option, but had also offered euthanasia as an option that children could pursue it. The board wanted to come out with a very strong, clear statement because the people that followed the National Animal Control Association are often, government leadership in shelters, but also above shelters, mayors and city managers and county managers.

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[Kristen] So we wrote this statement to be crystal clear that not only does National Animal Control Association support TNR, but also SNR working cap programs, barn cap programs. We talked a little bit about the ethics around kittens and that the system can serve kittens better if we're not not taking in all of the healthy free roaming cats, adult cats. And so we came out with this statement in hopes that it would be widely utilized and it is being, we think, used widely and it clarifies any confusion that there may have been more than one option in our minds.

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[Kristen] There isn't more than one option. There's community cat programs are your first option. And then the shelter comes into service, the life -saving safety net for all the animals that really do need need to come in for a short time.

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[Stacy] So if there's a local animal control organization in your state or community, NACA has the statement, it's just an advisory statement, they can choose whether they want to support it or not support it. And has there been any conflicts with like local animal control officers not necessarily agreeing with the statement?

[Kristen] We expected there to be and so we released a statement on social media and had hundreds and hundreds of comments and of those about 90 to 95 percent were positive and that really surprised us.

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[Kristen] We didn't expect that and that page is followed by animal control officers and we for a long time we've been pretty hard on officers and the reason I went on the National Animal Control Board is because I've met countless officers who don't want to be doing roundup and and killing up cats.

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[Kristen] They don't want to be impounding cats that they hadn't even known have no chance to get out. They want backup to say, "No, this cat is totally fine here, leave it alone." And so we're able to offer that now.

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[Kristen] And we think that that creates, we know that creates a more humane existence for officers who are doing really some of the hardest work in this movement right now.

[Stacy] Can you tell me a little bit about Haas?

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[Stacy] What it is? is, what it involves, and how it's tackling community cat issues?

[Kristen] So human animal support services really emerged out of COVID with this idea, this belief that we can't keep operating in our silos, we can't keep operating as independent national organizations who act as though we're in competition with one another, and that in reality non -profits are fiscally inclined competition with each other. But we sort of said this moment on the planet, this moment for animals, for people, for the environment is critical.

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[Kristen] And if we don't all come together, put aside our ideological differences, our beliefs, our competition, if we don't put all that aside and work together, we risk going back to mass youth in Asia and shelters.

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[Kristen] We risk going back to the 1970s in animal welfare. And I don't think that that's an issue. exaggeration. I think that with the how challenging things are with the natural disasters with people being evicted and unhoused, we face real challenges we haven't faced in my lifetime in this work.

[Kristen] And so Haas brings together about a thousand animal welfare professionals. And it's not a national organization.

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[Kristen] It's just a collaborative effort to say that this system is broken. Animal suffering in the United States is rather particular to the United States. It's not a worldwide system. There's many other ways to think about animal management.

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[Kristen] And we've become a society so intolerant of animals among us that our tendency is just to round them all up and put them into shelters. And not only do they die in shelters, and luckily those numbers are going down.

[Kristen] They're still very high for cats, but they're going down. Not only do they die in shelters, but there's a real humane issue. We're causing real trauma to animals and long -term impacts on their lives by sheltering them for months and years.

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[Kristen] In some cases, some cases they never leave. And we know we can do better. And we know that all the research and data tells us that with cats, there's absolutely no reason to continue on this trajectory.

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[Kristen] There is no benefit to communities. There is no public safety imperative. And there is no-- benefit to cats. And I realize saying that, that I can hear critics saying,

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[Kristen] "Are you saying get rid of the shelters?" And no, that's not what human animal support services is saying. Rather we're saying that the shelter should be a tiny sliver of a big pie of services and support for animals, and that everyone should be part of those solutions, that it shouldn't be relegated into the-- back hallways of animal shelters to care for our community's homeless pets. And we have to start wrapping our heads around the fact that everyone wants to help animals.

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[Kristen] 90% of people, if you ask them, can you help? Can you hold these kittens overnight? We can teach you how to feed them. Can you hold this old cat and put up signs in your neighborhood? The vast majority of people are gonna say yes. And we've got to start asking.

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[Kristen] We've got to start making it easy for people. And we have to transform these institutions We've got to start making it easy for them. We've got to start making it easy for them. We've got to start making it easy for them. We've got to start making it easy for them. aren't promoting the values that our society has with animals. And this is the piece that I think we're just getting to, is that we've been teaching children for generations.

[Kristen] If you find a lost pet, don't try to help it. Bring it to a shelter. Call animal control. We've been teaching these values to kids. We've been bringing them into cage environments and telling them that's normal.

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[Kristen] And it's not. It's not normal. And it's not necessary. And so we need to start with the way generations of young people telling them something entirely different, which is you can help solve this.

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[Kristen] You can be a TNR trapper. You can help that dog you find at home and empower people to do that. And we think that just that willingness to work together with your community is capable of totally transforming how we do all of this work.

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[Stacy] So if you are an individual who's out there trapping or whatever, is there a place for them at home? Haas?

[Kristen] Yes, so there's a couple of ways to get involved. The first thing is that we ask people to visit the Human Animal Support Services website.

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[Kristen] And on it, you'll find the pro resources. Under the pro resources, there's lots of community cat tools and information. One of the projects we did earlier this year was to work collaboratively to create a communications document for talking to people about community cat programs. And this is really to address the more recent criticisms that come out about community cat programs, such as, I get why you would release the Feral Cat, but why would you release the Friendly Cat?

[Kristen] So it's tackling those current questions that trappers often get, governments often get. So there's a lot of resources, particularly about community cat programs on the pro resources, but we also have a community cat working group. And this is an affinity group. It's a place where you can learn and discuss.

[Kristen] But it's also a place where there's a real commitment to getting the work done and helping communities.

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[Kristen] This year, we're helping Los Angeles Animal Services, we're helping San Diego Humane Society, we're helping Rochester, New York, really build those community cat programs,

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[Kristen] But also communicate with the community because ultimately we've got to help our communities get on board and change our community cultures. And so that's some of the work that we're doing. And you can get involved by any of that in any of that by going to humananimalsupportservices.org and just filling out that contact us forum and we'll get back to you.

26:39

[Stacy] That's great. Before we close out, Kristen, is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today? Okay.

[Kristen] Just that. In reflecting upon Haas and we're a year and a half or more into this project, and our teachers, our mentors, and our guides have been the people that have been trapping and returning hats.

[Kristen] There are the people, this whole program is built off of that grassroots work that's been being done for decades, and the kind of taking it into your own hands and saying, "I'm going to make my neighborhood a better place. I'm going to help the animals in front of me." That has to be the future. And it is a lot of credit to the work that's been done by so many of your listeners that we even can imagine a different world.

27:21

[Kristen] So just have a ton of gratitude for all of that work and how much it's led us to the place we are today.

[Stacy] Kristen, 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.

27:32

[outro] Thanks so much for having me, Stacey. (upbeat music) - 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.

27:43

[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, YouTube Stitcher, or wherever you listen to podcasts so you don't miss a single show. Thanks for listening and thank you for watching. that you do to help create a safe and healthy world for cats. Did you attend our recent online Feline Leukemia Day?

28:08

[Kristen] 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 sponsorships of the following organizations. The Tompkins Foundation for Feline Leukemia Advocacy, Humane Network, and Vets Pets.

[Kristen] Would you like to know more? support content that helps save feline lives? Please visit [CommunityCatsPodcast .com](https://CommunityCatsPodcast.com) and click on Support CCP to learn more about sponsorship opportunities.