



This article appeared in
The Current of Egg Harbor Township, Vol. 8, No. 43 on
 May 30, 2002



Anthony Smedile

L.I.C.K. "residents" nap and play on the breezy, fenced-in patio of the Egg Harbor Township shelter.

Shelter relies on community Support to save cat lives

By **AMY HATALA**
 Staff Writer

Like many people, Peggy Sterling goes shopping each week for items that are essential to her everyday life. But Sterling's cart looks anything but normal as she approaches the checkout counter at the end of a weekly supermarket visit.

Her shopping trip includes 75 pounds of cat food, 25 pounds of kitty litter and 20 rolls of paper towels -- all of which will last one week at the Sterling household.

And when jokingly asked by a

cashier if she is caring for an army of cats, Sterling can truthfully say, "yes". Located in her backyard is a non-profit, 50-cat rescue shelter called Life Improvement for Cats and Kittens, better known as L.I.C.K.

Sterling has been trapping, spaying, rehabilitating and adopting out abandoned cats in the Atlantic City area for five years. She cannot estimate exactly how many cats she has saved from a life on the streets, but says she has routinely adopted out about 50 cats per year lately.

The shelter has a temperature-



Peggy Sterling, founder of Life Improvement for Cats and Kittens, (L.I.C.K.) seeks volunteers and donations.

controlled indoor section for those cats that prefer a domesticated life and an adjacent outdoor section complete with jungle gyms for the outdoorsy type kitten. A door that never closes allows shelter inhabitants to pass between the two sections at their leisure.

A distinct system allows newcomers to integrate themselves into the shelter at their own pace, starting in self-contained cages and working their way to the outside.

Sterling's well-thought-out shelter is not a mass of stainless steel and tile as one might envision, however. It is a converted shed, concrete patio and fencing creatively connected to provide the most comfort for the least amount of money, a project that has been done in stages over the years as donations would allow.

In fact, Sterling, a web site consultant originally from Northfield, never actually planned the shelter in the first place. It all began while she was living in Philadelphia and stumbled upon a cat that had been hit by a car.

Sterling could not bear to see the kitty suffer, so she took him to a veterinarian to be put to sleep. But when she returned to the office later to pay the bill for euthanizing the animal, the vet told her the cat was very much alive and would be just fine with a little TLC.

Sterling took the cat home and nursed him back to health, and soon had herself a healthy and grateful pet. She then began to make it a habit to look for hurt kitties and become their guardian angel, one cat at a time.

Once she moved from her apartment in Philadelphia to a spacious Egg Harbor Township home in the heart of a thick pine grove, Sterling found that more space in her yard meant more cats could be helped. Little by little she began to create what has now become the L.I.C.K. shelter with all 50 residents.



Plans are in the works for a new infirmary to be called the "R and R Barn" with separate cages for sick kitties so colds will not spread through the ranks anymore

Sterling and shelter volunteers have spent days crawling in basements and camping out behind buildings, waiting for homeless cats to wander into humane traps. The bulk of her rescues come from abandoned buildings in Atlantic City, but some have come from closer areas, like behind the Hoyt's Movie Theater in Egg Harbor Township.

She has a special system for naming the cats to remember who is who.

"We name them having to do with where they came from, how they were rescued or a special characteristic about them. Otherwise we would never remember their names," she said.

Herr newest arrivals are two week-old kittens that were found in a shipment of hay bails -- without their mother. Sterling and her volunteers found the two scared kittens a surrogate mother, who is now nursing them, and aptly named them Hayley and Bailey.

Once Hayles and Baily are old enough to be weaned from their new mom they will join the other cats in the shelter, but the two new kittens are likely to nbe the only additions for a while until some of L.I.C.K.'s cats are adopted.

"We are at our limit," Sterling said sorrowfully. "We can't fit any more, plus it would not be financially feasible to take anymore cats.

Money for shelter supplies has come from donations, fund-raisers and

Sterling's own pocket. L.I.C.K. holds a Meow Mixer every February, a dance and silent auction for humans only, which raises a substantial amount to help out. But as the shelter gears up to add a new section, more donations and volunteers and desperately needed.

Plans are in the works for a new infirmary to be called the "R and R Barn" with separate cages for sick kitties so colds will not spread through the ranks anymore. Those sick kitties will need medicine and caretakers, which Sterling says are the most important part of the shelter.

"The shelter needs volunteers. We have seven volunteers now who all work full time, but we need more people to donate a couple of hours per week, maybe one morning or evening, to help us out," Sterling said.

Volunteers must be at least 18 years old and "have to like cats." \duties for willing souls include sweeping, scooping, feeding, cuddling and playing.

Egg harbor Township resident and volunteer Dawn Dochney supplements her time with the cats by gardening around the shelter and another volunteer takes laundry home to help out.

Sterling is also hoping that a veterinarian technician will come forward and donate a hew hours

once a month to help clean ears and clip nails, which are difficult jobs for untrained hands.

In addition to volunteers L.I.C.K. is always in need of donations and sponsors.

Gift cards to Sam's Club or PetSmart, where supplies can be purchased, are greatly appreciated, as well as payment on the shelter's veterinarian account at Dr. Meg Scott's office in Mays Landing.

"She's available whenever we need her, she even comes out to the shelter and she's wonderful. But she does need to make a living, too" Sterling said.

If area residents do not have extra money to give the can still help in a variety of ways.

L.I.C.K. needs foster care families to give up a room or closet in their house to mommy cats and their kittens. The mom and babies would stay for about eight weeks, then return to the shelter.

Since kittens are susceptible to all kinds of infections carried by adult cats, it is much healthier for them to stay with their mom at a foster family's house until they have had their first distemper shots than to stay at the shelter.

While Sterling welcomes any help she can get, she stresses the point that L.I.C.K is already full, since the shelter

does not euthanize any cats.

"We are already at capacity, so we can't go around rescuing every stray cat that people see. We are not animal control."

If people do call Sterling about stray cats, she will suggest to them ways to handle the situation, such as her trap, neuter and release program.

She loans people a humane trap, takes the cat once he is in captivity, has him neutered at her cost and then releases the cat back where he was living. The act may not save that particular cat from a street life, but it will prevent him from creating any more homeless felines.

Even if the shelter did want to take in more cats, Sterling says they already know where the stray cats are.

They have already rescued 19 cats from the Virginia Avenue section of Atlantic City, where cat colonies regularly form, and have received dozens of phone calls over the years about colonies throughout the area.

But Sterling does what she can with what she's got, and 50 cats per year have better lives because of it.

For more information about the L.I.C.K. shelter, log onto the shelter's web site at www.catsandkittens.org or call 609-653-9004.

Donations can be sent to Life Improvement for Cats and Kittens, P.O. Box 392, Mays Landing, NJ 08330.



Anthony Smedile

Two curious kitties venture close to the fence to check out the camera