

Foster Focus - A Gift of Love

By providing hospice care to homeless cats, Jennifer Corsun makes their last days peaceful and comfortable.

By Cimeron Morrissey

"Hospice care is about celebrating life," says Jennifer Corsun, seen here snuggling her current foster cat, Chloe, who has mast-cell tumors. I knew my 92-year-old friend Sally was going to pass away while in hospice care, so I made sure I was there to hold her hand as she took her last breath. I thought it would be difficult to watch life leave the body of my dear friend, but, instead, I felt a sense of peaceful comfort for having helped make her last moments happy and warm.

In my experience as a cat rescuer, I've learned that animals also appreciate friendship and love in their final days, but there are very few people who are willing to provide hospice care to homeless cats. Jennifer Corsun is one of the rare people who gives the gift of sanctuary to terminally ill cats that don't have anyone to be with them as they pass.

"Of all the work I do with animals, hospice is what touches me the most and is the most important to me," says Corsun, who has provided hospice foster care for more than 25 cats in 10 years. "It's a good thing, not something bad or sad. It's about celebrating life. It's such a privilege to be with them at the end of their lives. I think they're such wonderful creatures, and I learn so much from each of them."

As an employee of the Cat World section at Best Friends Animal Society in Kanab, Utah, Corsun spends time getting to know each of the cats at the sanctuary and their individual needs. This is no small task: Best Friends normally houses more than 800 rescued felines.

Since the sanctuary often takes in special-needs animals for which it's challenging to find homes, those that aren't adopted receive lifetime care from staff and volunteers. When Corsun sees terminally ill cats that would benefit from personal attention, she volunteers to foster them at her home, which goes beyond her job description.

"I wish every cat here had a home for their whole lives, but I can't give every one of them homes. So this is what I can do to help, and it's so needed," Corsun says. "At Best Friends, it's not a 9-to-5 thing; people should know how dedicated everyone is here. This is what we do with our lives — we're all about the animals. If we have to take them home, we do."

Corsun has provided end-of-life care to a wide range of cats, from those with cage rage to cancer, from elderly cats with renal failure to newborn kittens with incurable health issues. She emphasizes that hospice fostering is not simply about letting a cat pass away, which is a common misconception.

"You have to recognize the balance between quality and quantity of life and learn when to say 'it's time now.' Sometimes those decisions are hard to make, and it's quite a responsibility."

While some people feel that they can't bring themselves to foster failing cats, Corsun believes it's an honor that immeasurably enriches her life. Speaking about her most recent foster, William, a very shy cat who was rescued from a hoarder, Corsun brightens at the memory of how much he blossomed in her care.

"At first, he'd run away when I approached him. But after a while, he'd come up to me in bed and all he wanted me to do was pet him," she says. "He just wanted love, a connection with someone. It feels amazing that I was able to be that person for him. I was able to help him find happiness, even if it was at the end of his life."

On his last day, William let Corsun pick him up and hold him, a memory that still touches her. Providing hospice foster care isn't for everyone since it requires ample emotional energy, time and compassion. But for those who can offer this important service to cats in need, the rewards can be well worth it.

"I have learned so much from these cats," Corsun says. "For example, Kahli was a skinny old lady cat, but she didn't mourn that she was old and decrepit. She just focused on what she could do and what she'd enjoy, so she'd sit outside in the cattery and watch the birds. These cats don't dwell on things, and they don't worry. They teach me to just be and to not dwell on the things that we can't change in our lives."

Corsun encourages everyone who feels they're up to the challenge to contact their local cat rescue groups and shelters to



volunteer as hospice foster caregivers.

"These cats give so much love, understanding and attention," she says. "I am so grateful that they were in my life, and I hope other people try hospice care so that they can experience this as well. It's a really beautiful gift to give and one that gives you so much more in return than you could ever imagine.

Cimeron Morrissey is a cat rescuer, award-winning writer and Animal Planet's 2007 Cat Hero of the Year. She is a member of the board of directors of Homeless Cat Network, a no-kill feline rescue organization in the San Francisco Bay Area.