

## Foster Focus - Feline Superstar

**Mr. Pibb, celebrity diplomate, changes the world for cats.**

*By Cimeron Morrissey*

As 'mascot,' Mr. Pibb is proving that all cats have the potential for greatness. It's not every day that you see a cat happily trotting on a noisy treadmill with his tail in the air. But Mr. Gregory Xavier Pibb isn't just another cat, and he's not just trying to keep trim for his adoring fans. The 9-month-old foster cat is the official mascot of the Washington Humane Society (WHS) and is blossoming into a celebrity who demonstrates the shelter's unique behavior and training approaches to help animals overcome fears and build confidence. But it doesn't stop there — Mr. Pibb also is the star of WHS' humane education and training efforts with children, foster parents and military veterans alike. He even takes time out of his busy schedule to help socialize rescued cats. He's an icon in-the making, and, with his tuxedo coat always clean and shiny, he's ready for the spotlight.

"Dogs receive a lot more attention in movies, commercials and in the public, and cats have become second-class citizens," says Kevin Simpson, director of animal behavior and training for WHS. This is reflected in adoptions as well. According to the Humane Society of the United States, 43 percent of dogs in all shelters nationally are adopted, versus only 29 percent of cats. "Mr. Pibb changes things by helping represent cats in the community. We wanted to show people that you can do a lot of things with cats: Teach them tricks, walk on leashes, take them for car rides. What Mr. Pibb provides is priceless."

All across the Washington, D.C., area, the famous four-legged ambassador shows off his abilities, which include sitting on command and giving high-fives. The innovative approach shatters peoples' negative and neutral perceptions about cats, especially at-risk children at the inner city schools that Mr. Pibb and WHS' humane educator Shakela Brown visit together. Since very few of the kids have been exposed to affectionate pet cats, Mr. Pibb wows them simply by being himself.

Mr. Pibb's animal magnetism earns him furry fans at WHS' adoption center, while his blog earns him human admirers from around the nation. "He's always a ham, stretched out on everybody's lap," Simpson says. "People who were once afraid of cats are suddenly smiling and extremely moved by the experience. He helps instill compassion for cats, which is a large part of the program."

Mr. Pibb even occasionally makes appearances at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where he recently stole the show while demonstrating the therapeutic benefit of animals.

But fame hasn't spoiled Mr. Pibb. Once he gets back to the shelter, he sets aside the glamorous life to help socialize timid and frightened rescued cats. "We get some cats that are terribly lonely, uncomfortable and scared, and after testing them, we let them out in our office with Mr. Pibb," says Kate Zapf, WHS' foster program manager. "Pibb comes around and checks on them, even if they're hiding, and spends time with them. He's very persuasive and persistent about getting shy cats to come out of their shells, even under-socialized ones. Next thing you know, a couple days later, they're relaxed and happy, thanks to him."

After that job is done, he motivates and helps teach volunteers how to be good foster parents. At the beginning of fostering classes, he wanders around to greet the excited participants and interact with their children, and then he lets the instructors use him for demonstrations about proper cat care, such as how to clean ears and trim nails. Although he appreciates manicures and ear cleaning, he likes to "keep it real" by doing the rest of the grooming himself.

Mr. Pibb shows off his schmoozing skills with WHS class instructor and trainer Hanna Lentz. When he's strutting through the WHS adoption center, the cats are captivated by him and rub up against their cages, mew to catch his attention and reach out to touch him as if he were a furry superstar. Little do they know that he really is one — the cat even has his own blog. WHS staffers believe he's a testament to socialization and training, and they hope he'll prove that all cats have the potential for greatness.

Zapf is amazed at the example Mr. Pibb sets. "He shows people what great pets cats can be and what they can do. He's a very good schmoozer," she says.



While WHS staffers lavish Mr. Pibb with praise for the positive impact he makes, they too deserve some credit, since they are his foster parents and trainers.

"He's 500 pounds of personality packed into 9 pounds of cat; he's turned into a force of nature. He's game for everything: He's an educator, he helps socialize cats, he excites foster parents, he's a demonstrator — he does more than all of us [at WHS] combined. Yeah, I'm a fan of Mr. Pibb; he's one cool cat."

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