

Unsung Heroes: Cats Get a Chance at 10th Life

Berka and Jim Smock offer a haven for cats no one else wants, operating a shelter out of their home in Central California.

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Posted: Tue May 1 00:00:00 PDT 2001

It started with a single cat. Twenty years ago, an aging gray cat with weakening kidneys found itself left at the steps of the Redwood Inn, a German home-style restaurant operated by Berka and Jim Smock in quaint Santa Barbara, Calif.

"A man who knew I liked cats told me that his cat was too old, it cost him \$400 in medical bills and that he didn't want it anymore," Berka Smock recalls. "I took pity on this old cat, took him home, renamed him Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and, well, the rest is history."

The "rest" refers to the more than 200 cats catered to and cared for by the Smocks, an elderly couple who converted their corner lot property in downtown Santa Barbara into a second-chance haven for cats that are too old, too sick, too injured or too neglected.

They've long since abandoned their restaurant business to champion abandoned cats. Together, they operate the 10th Life Foundation, a nonprofit organization devoted to stretching the lives of cats to beyond their legendary nine.

This is not a typical cat shelter. The Smocks welcome folks willing to sponsor a cat from a distance but don't press for donations or engage in elaborate fund-raisers. They don't actively seek adopters and would rather spend their life savings caring for aging, ailing cats than worry and wonder if an adopter would commit the time and money it takes to care for a cat with special needs.

A rare exception was made for Violetta Landek, of Manhattan, N.Y., who convinced the Smocks she and her husband, Charlie, could provide proper care for Jumper, now renamed Spunky. The cat likes to leap on shoulders with claws drawn. Since leaving 10th Life, Spunky travels by cat carrier with the Landeks all over New York City, including stops to the local bagel shop, Rockefeller Center and the Easter parade.

"College students [had] abandoned him, and he was starving when Berka found him," Landek says. "He's been our ambassador of goodwill. Sure, our T-shirts are full of holes, but we don't mind. Spunky is so full of love."