

Cat Rescue - Out of the Ashes

After surviving a fire, 8 cats find loving, permanent homes.

BY COURTNEY MACNEALY

Tory's happy ending encourages Varsalone to continue her rescue efforts.

Susie Varsalone was just finishing up feeding her neighbor's dogs, which she had volunteered to housesit, when she received a devastating phone call.

"The barn is on fire!" her close friend and fellow animal rescuer shouted. Varsalone raced to her car to head for the barn, where she had been feeding orphaned cats for more than three months. When she arrived, her worst fears were confirmed. Yellow police tape encircled a pile of debris that previously housed Varsalone's beloved felines.

"It was one of those things that you think you must be dreaming," Varsalone says.

While many community members mourned the loss of the great architectural structure — the German-style barn was nearly 140 years old — Varsalone was concerned about the health of the barn's inhabitants. The barn was in transition between owners, and there were no horses inside at the time of the fire, leaving only the small community of stray cats.

Varsalone brought her cat carriers to the barn every day, in hopes of finding any of the 10 cats that she had come to love. She tried to signal the cats with her signature "kissing" cue that she had used to greet them in the past. By using what Varsalone calls her "gourmet tray" — a large platter with small bowls of assorted flavors of wet food and two large plates of dry food — she found eight of the cats over the next week. With the help of three friends, Varsalone fostered the cats for months until she found homes for them. She maintained a rigorous interviewing process to make sure each cat would be cared for and loved. After each cat was assigned a home, Varsalone followed up with a phone call and a visit.

"I think she checked in as much as if I had adopted a child!" jokes adoptive parent Phyllis Dickes.

Dickes had contacted Varsalone after seeing an advertisement for the barn cats in the local newspaper. Dickes' little gray Persian, Sir Nicholas, had passed away the year before, and she was looking for a new cat to bring joy into her home. After meeting Dickes, Varsalone knew which of the rescued cats would be the perfect match: a female tortoiseshell kitten.

Tory, as Dickes later named her, was the last cat rescued from the barn. She had lived on her own for eight days, long after her brothers and sisters were found.

"She was so shook up," Varsalone recalls. "The barn was nothing like she had remembered it."

Slowly, Tory revealed her spirited personality and settled into life indoors. "Monkey-doodle," as her foster parents affectionately call her, uses her tree-climbing skills to scale living room furniture and bookcases, and she demands long hours of playtime. Tory's energy even has inspired Dickes' 12-year-old cat, Patches, to start chasing toys again.

Tory's happy ending encourages Varsalone to continue her rescue efforts and reaffirms her admiration of all cats.

"They love — wanting nothing in return," Varsalone says, "except for your love."

Courtney MacNealy is a junior journalism and English student at Penn State University. An avid animal lover, she enjoys spending time with her own cat, Claudia Monet, and horseback riding her thoroughbred mare, Flirtatious.