

Cat Rescue - Second Chances

FIV-positive cats make great pets.

BY POLINA OLSEN

Felix at CAT before his adoption. More than a year had passed since Judy Cooper's cat died, and she was ready to adopt. Still, after hours of searching at the Cat Adoption Team (CAT) in Sherwood, Ore., she couldn't quite find the right cat.

"I went into different rooms, sat and looked around," Cooper recalls. "But, the cats weren't speaking to me. When I got into the FIV room, this little guy came up, and somehow I was touched."

Black fur, tattered ears and FIV-positive, Felix was the longest-staying cat at the shelter. He loved being petted, and Cooper remembers his soulful look. The next day, she visited CAT and burst into tears when she saw him. The adoption specialist explained that FIV-positive cats make wonderful pets, and Cooper took Felix home.

CAT, a no-kill animal shelter finds homes for thousands of cats each year, including those infected with feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Medical director Wendi Rekers, DVM, knows that fighting misconceptions helps potential adopters make good choices.

"FIV and HIV are different viruses," she says. Only cats get FIV, and it's primarily spread through blood and saliva. "You won't transfer it by petting one cat and then another."

Rekers encourages FIV-positive adoptions. To prevent spreading the infection, she advocates keeping FIV-positive cats indoors and not mixing them with cats that don't have the disease.

"Many [of these cats] stay healthy for years, make happy, active pets and end up dying of unrelated causes. Most don't require special medical care other than frequent checkups," she says.

The FIV room at CAT. Carrie Fagerstrom, a CAT foster parent, agrees. She was thrilled to learn of Felix's adoption. "He's the cutest thing, the way he walks up to you and tilts his head." Fagerstrom particularly remembers his battered ears. "It always blows me away with these cats. You know what a rough life they've had."

Fagerstrom also remembers another favorite — a tabby with a deformed leg named Buzz. He ended up at CAT after an emergency clinic removed a shotgun pellet from his leg. More than a year later, Buzz needed a break from shelter life. Fagerstrom brought him to the FIV room in her home.

Meanwhile Chris and Elaine Owcarz regularly visited CAT looking for the perfect pet.

"We kept going to the FIV room," says Chris Owcarz. "The cats always seemed more calm and friendly."

They settled on an orange, FIV-positive beauty named Chester. Wanting a friend for Chester, they remembered the sweet tabby with the deformed leg, who was temporarily in Fagerstrom's foster care.

Today, Buzz and Chester are the best of friends.

"We love these guys. They're our boys," Owcarz says. "They chase each other around the house. It's amazing how healthy they are."

The couple advocates adopting FIV-positive cats.

"I was worried about medical bills, but it hasn't been worse than other cats," Owcarz says. "Give them a chance. It's amazing the love these guys give."

Polina Olsen is a freelance writer living in Portland, Ore., with her husband Andy, Somali Koshka and Tonkinese Baba Ganoush.