

Former business exec spends hours trapping feral cats

Sharon Dargay
Staff Writer

The toughest part about trapping cats is the waiting. "I remember the time my friend and I were in a trailer park. We were there for hours. We were starving. We had to go to the bathroom," says Cheryl Phillips, who snares feral felines for spaying and neutering.

The weather can be grueling, too.

"Blizzard, I've done that before. I've been out there trapping in sub-zero temperatures."

And the travel can be exhausting.

"I've gone as far as Flint, Owosso, wherever I'm needed."

Since 2012, Phillips, a Northville resident, has caught more than 100 "community cats" — the feral animals and abandoned pets that roam neighborhoods and often live in outdoor colonies. Working in conjunction with the Humane Society of Huron Valley's TNR (trap-neuter-release) program, Phillips often spends weekends trapping cats and transporting them to HSHV where they are spayed or neutered, given rabies vaccinations and are micro-chipped. When they've recovered from surgery, she returns them to the trapping site for release. The idea is to stop the reproduction cycle and ultimately reduce the number of community cats, along with cat intakes at animal shelters. At HSHV stray cat intakes dropped 23 percent since the program started.

"We have to stop this overpopulation," says Phillips, who blames the problem on irresponsible cat owners and shelters that release cats for adoption before they are spayed and neutered. "I try to do whatever I can."

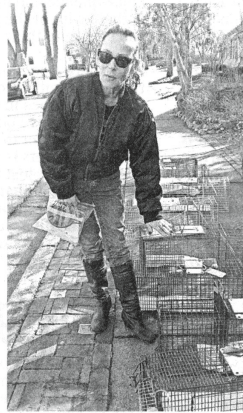
Phillips, who is married and owns three cats, retired in 2014 from Masco Corp., where she served as vice president and director of global purchasing. She is an adjunct professor at University of Michigan - Dearborn and, after retirement, turned consulting work into a full time job. She served on the board of the Michigan Humane Society (MHS) for five years, but became increasingly critical of its shelter practices and euthanasia rate. She quit the board in June 2011 — and three other board members followed.

Phillips didn't allow the experience to rob her passion for animals. She became more tenacious than ever, taking TNR classes at HSHV and then responding to calls for help.

"I've been all over the place. There was one cat in Ann Arbor... I had to go back four times to try to get him. Sometimes they are so smart."

Setting the bait

On a recent Saturday morning, Phillips, and her helpers, Gayle Dickerson of Westland and Nancy Tranchida of Commerce Township, hoped the trapping would be fast and easy. They'd caught a break in the weather, with sunshine and



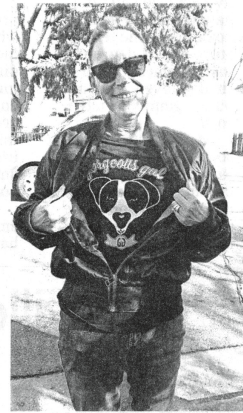
SHARON DARGAY
Cheryl Phillips lines up traps before moving them to the front porch of a home in Rochester.



SHARON DARGAY
Cheryl Phillips of Northville adds tuna to her cat trap.



SHARON DARGAY
Nancy Tranchida of Commerce gets ready to spoon tuna onto plates for the traps.



SHARON DARGAY
Cheryl Phillips of Northville shows off the logo of her new book about a pit bull she rescued. She also named a nonprofit foundation after the dog.



SHARON DARGAY
Cheryl Phillips uses a combination of her own traps and traps from the Humane Society of Huron Valley.



SHARON DARGAY
Cheryl Phillips' book is written from a rescued pit bull's perspective.



SHARON DARGAY
Nancy Tranchida (left) and Cheryl Phillips get ready to fill traps with food.

a morning air that felt like spring.

They prepped nine traps with soft padding and small plates of tuna, before placing them on the front porch at Patricia Kane's house in Rochester. Kane began providing food, fresh water and shelter to a colony of neighborhood cats three years ago. The colony population decreased, but nine kittens recently joined the group. Fearing they would soon reproduce, she called Phillips for help.

"We had re-homed everybody except two cats. We were pretty happy. And we hadn't seen those cats around the neighborhood," Kane said. "And then neighbors alerted me this year that kittens were born, but they did nothing. They'd pick up the kittens and pet them, then put them back and did not do a thing about them."

"So, they come here and once they come I have to deal with it."

Phillips and her crew often

spend hours in their cars, waiting patiently for the traps to close. They take breaks at local restaurants and then return to the trapping site to wait longer. After the cats are trapped, Phillips immediately takes them to HSHV, where she has after-hours access to the building.

Three community cats warily checked out Kane's front porch but didn't take the bait and left. Phillips and Kane figured strong winds and too many traps made the animals uneasy.

The group left empty-handed after more than eight hours on the job. Phillips vowed she would return.

Returning

"Believe me we have spent many hours in areas that we didn't even see a cat," said Dickerson, who began assisting after Phillips trapped a cat for her. "I was given her name and she came out and trapped him, had him fixed and now he's at my house. His name is

Buddy."

Tranchida worked with Phillips at Masco and helped her friend with rescues even before she started trapping cats.

"We were on the way back from a meeting and I was following Cheryl," Tranchida said, adding that Phillips stopped her car and allowed a stray dog to jump in. "She was in the car with him and I ran to get a bowl, leash, collar and everything. When you're with Cheryl you never know what's going to happen."

Last year Phillips rescued a dog from the Southfield expressway. She has taken abandoned kittens from beneath shrubbery and at vacant homes. She once trapped a skunk inadvertently, but sweet-talked it from the cage and it didn't retaliate.

"My car is full of rescue stuff all the time," Phillips said. "I have everything in there." She even keeps a bale of straw in her car during winter for outdoor dog houses and

cat shelters. "I've always loved animals."

She started a nonprofit foundation and named it after a pit bull, "GG" (Gorgeous Girl) that she rescued in 2009 while working on a Habitat for Humanity house in Detroit. She even wrote a short novel, "GG's Journey, From Lost To Loved" from the dog's perspective. GG tells her own story of being homeless, found, placed in a shelter where she was misunderstood because of breed stereotypes, fostered and then adopted. The book was released in November and is available from amazon.com and through ggsgourney.com in digital and paperback versions.

Phillips hopes the story brings awareness to the plight of homeless animals, especially pit bulls. She plans to use proceeds to continue her rescue work. Her long-range plans include opening a cat sanctuary in north Oakland County, where at-risk children could connect with felines.