

Feline Healing

By Debra J. White



Silky photos courtesy of Sheila Semrou



Nurse Silky

At least 10,500 therapy dogs are registered with the Delta Society; they register only 170 cats. That doesn't stop Silky, Dexter, Martson, Kenny or other frisky felines from healing patients in nursing homes, rehab facilities and hospitals. Children learn to read because of cats. Cats teach compassion in domestic violence shelters, group homes, and crisis nurseries.

Dr. Boris Levinson, a child psychologist, coined the term pet therapy. In the 1960s, Dr. Levinson added his dog Jingles to therapy sessions to see if it would make a difference to his young patients grappling with problems. Results were so successful that pet therapy expanded.

Over the years, pet therapy was fine tuned and is now divided into animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted therapy (AAT). A cat cheering up patients in a nursing home is an example of an animal-assisted activity. Animal-assisted therapy, frequently medically prescribed, is goal oriented such as decreasing a patient's isolation or improving the quality of life.

Why so few therapy cats? Diane Decker, pet education manager for the Arizona Animal Welfare League & SPCA, also evaluates animals for the Delta Society. "Cat personalities are often more reserved in a strange environment. They take longer to acclimate than dogs," she says. Cats often do better as "in-station" pets where they live at a facility, wandering from room to room visiting patients. Decker says the paucity of cat therapists may also lie with owners who presume their pets aren't capable.

In 2001 Sheila Semrou, a licensed architect, lost her job. The animal lover volunteered at the Wisconsin Humane Society exercising dogs while job searching. Another cat wasn't what she expected; she had an adopted cat at home. However, a cream colored cat named Silky changed all that. "She caught my eye and I just had to adopt her," Semrou says.

Lovable, friendly, and comfortable with strangers, Silky seemed the ideal therapy pet. Semrou joined the Humane Society's Visiting Companion program in 2002 and started at St. John's on the Lake, a skilled nursing facility where

Semrou's mom, Clementine, was a patient. Semrou and Silky spread joy to seniors. Mrs. Semrou, who always had a lifelong affection for cats, was their last stop. "After a serious illness, Silky's visits brought immense joy to mom. I'll always remember how she hugged Silky, my little Angel." Silky was a constant companion for Semrou when her mom passed away in 2006.

By 2010 Semrou says Silky was ready for advanced therapy. The once-abandoned cat breezed through the Delta Society's stringent behavior exam and began the more challenging animal assisted therapy (AAT) at Heartland Hospice with patients at the end stages of life. Silky's visits had a purpose such as providing a patient with a diversion from pain. Impending loss though can stir up angry feelings among patients and their families. Silky's soothing presence benefitted everyone including staff. Laura Hey, president and founder of Health Healers, the pet therapy organization affiliated with Heartland Hospice, says that Silky is remarkably gentle and brings calm to patients. "She is a wise and exceptional creature, a gift."

Gabriel's Angels, an Arizona-based pet therapy group with offices

in Phoenix and Tucson, was founded in 2000 with a goal to free maltreated, neglected and at-risk children from the shackles of domestic violence through healing pet therapy.

A former shelter cat named Kenny was their only therapy cat. His owner Diane McGuire brought Kenny to a group home for troubled teenagers. Through activities developed by child welfare and animal shelter professionals, Diane and Kenny taught teenagers to develop kindness and compassion for animals. Kids at a group home called him a cool cat and gently pet him on each visit. Even staff doted on Kenny. During one session, they listened to Kenny's heart with a stethoscope and then listened to their own. "Teens drew the parallel that Kenny was a living being just like they were. Children who witnessed violence at home may lack empathy and abuse animals. Kenny not only taught compassion but he probably saved a few lives along the way," says Pam Gaber, president and founder of Gabriel's Angels.

In addition to Gabriel's Angels, Kenny offered comfort to hospice patients and their families and friends. Featured in local and national media, Kenny won honorable mention in 2007

from the Delta Society's Beyond Limits Pet Partners Team.

Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF), headquartered in Walnut Creek, CA, has a mission of people rescuing animals and animals rescuing people. A signature program, the Pet Hug Pack has 126 qualified pets (eight cats) that make 166 visits each month to hospitals, assisted living facilities and schools. Elena Bicker, ARF's executive director says, "The pets bring joy, unconditional love and a distraction from pain. Family and staff benefit too," says Bicker. Cats are also instrumental in a local reading program, in community events at ARF, and in the surrounding area.

Adopted by Wendy Panaro from the Wisconsin Humane Society, Dexter the cat serves as a reading ambassador with Words for Whiskers, a collaborative reading program of the Milwaukee public library and the Humane Society. Designed to improve children's reading skills, Words for Whiskers has several dog teams and Dexter. Animal reading programs are popular because children are comfortable pronouncing a word incorrectly in front of an animal. Besides teaming up with children, Dexter visits a nursing home and a hospice. He's one busy cat.

Marston, a stray that marched out of a rural Indiana cornfield and into the loving home of Pam Solstis, is a therapy cat at the VNA Hospice in Valparaiso. "I lay Marston into a patient's bed, in the crook of his left arm," says Solstis. Marston fussed wanting the patient's right side to snuggle. Three times Solstis tried to settle the usually docile cat. The patient's daughter was in the room at the time. "Her father's right side was his old dog's favorite cuddling spot. It's almost as if Marston sensed what the dying man needed, a connection with his once beloved companion."

Cats such as Silky, Dexter, Kenny and Marston demonstrate that cats heal too. They just needed the chance to prove they can work alongside dogs in nursing homes, hospitals, and reading programs. As more facilities offer animal-assisted therapy, cats will be there too.



Kenny



The Delta Society, founded in 1977, is a world leader in animal healing with a mission to advance human health and well-being through positive interactions with animals.

Editor's Note: Delta originated as a Latham Foundation committee.