

CHAMPION FOR CATS

Out of the Shadows

Unwanted cats thrive thanks to Sheila and Roy Smith's rescue organization.

FOR AS LONG AS SHE CAN remember, Sheila Smith has had an uncanny ability for noticing stray cats in even the most dark and hidden places. So when she and her husband, Roy, a veterinarian, founded their own rescue organization in Round Rock, Texas, in 1997, the choice of a name was an easy one: Shadow Cats Rescue (SCR). From the start, the Smiths have been drawn to the "undercats," as Sheila calls them.

"It was the cats that were looking at me with those soulful eyes — skinny and starved," she says. "People talked about them like they shouldn't exist, and that's what really tugged at my heart."



Life at the Sanctuary

Apparently, all that tugging paid off. Today, SCR is home to dozens of undercats, many of whom have come from abusive, hoarding or special-needs situations. Others are community cats (the word feral, notes Roy, "has such negative connotations") brought in through SCR's extensive trap-neuter-return (TNR) program and deemed too ill or vulnerable to continue living outdoors.

Their 1,700-square-foot creek-side

A feline resident enjoys one of the many outdoor enclosures at the sanctuary.

sanctuary, built onto the Smiths' home, includes upper and lower levels, decks, heated beds, custom "houses" and plenty of enclosed outdoor space — all connected by way of cat doors.

"This is all wire and wood — nothing fancy at all," Sheila says. "I think what makes this so special, so incredible, is really the people and the love that's here. It

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sounds so trite, but it really is true."

Since 2004, more than 200 cats have lived out their lives at the sanctuary. Another 500 have been adopted to indoor-only homes, and SCR's TNR efforts have included about 3,000 cats. In 2007, SCR received the Guardian Award for "compassionate and innovative work for the advancement of the health and welfare

of cats" from the Austin Humane Society. "It's a huge honor," Sheila says, "and we were thrilled to receive it on behalf of Shadow Cats."

The Smiths are quick to credit their team of 70 dedicated volunteers for the success of SCR. David Murphy, who says he "sort of unofficially assumed the role of volunteer coordinator" after joining the organization two years ago, suggests that SCR offers its volunteers a unique experience.

"Our residents will most likely spend the rest of their lives with us," Murphy says, "so our volunteers have a rare opportunity to form long-term relationships with the cats. In a very real sense, our volunteers are their family."

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BY PETER J. WOLF

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVID MURPHY (FACING PAGE) AND PENNY PEERCE (THIS PAGE)

A Very Special Cat

Among the many cats who have spent the remainder of their lives at SCR was Cookie Princess Warrior, whom Sheila calls "her soul mate." When Cookie was diagnosed with feline leukemia, the news was devastating.

"My world fell apart for a while," Sheila says. But Cookie lived five years post-diagnosis, and enjoyed the kind of pampered life most cats would envy. "We did everything in our power to honor her," Sheila notes, "and gave her as much space as possible." For the Smiths, that meant more cat doors, decks, access to fresh air and a companion.

"Once we did that," Sheila says, "we realized what a need there was in terms of options for FeLV cats. We ended up with a dozen." Since 2006, SCR has taken in about 75 FeLV cats. "If I had my choice," Sheila says, "we would be a leukemia-only shelter, but we have too many others with different issues."



Sheila Smith and one of her many feline friends

"Just last week, we lost two," Roy says. "Every time I put a cat to sleep, it's a little bit of a sense of failure, particularly if it's one of the younger cats ... I almost feel like I failed my final exam, because we haven't been able to figure out how to stop this or cure it."

Roy operates the Central Texas Cat Hospital, just a stone's throw from SCR.

"Fortunately for me," he says, "this is my vocation and avocation, so I don't mind devoting my whole life to it." But it's clear the FeLV cats hold a special

place in Roy's heart. "A little piece of me goes with each one of these," he says. "Some days I wonder how much more I have left, but I do have a lot left, I guess. I hope."

SCR is home to dozens of cats who have had a rough start.

Sheila, too, seems to have a lot left. "It's never about me," she states. "Yes, it hurts my heart — rips it out sometimes — but I never think I cannot do it. There is no choice, in my mind." 🐾

Peter J. Wolf is a lecturer at Arizona State University, a freelance writer and blogger (he blogs about feral cat and TNR issues at www.voxfelina.com). He lives in Phoenix with his six rescued cats.

For more information on SCR, visit www.shadowcats.net.



COOKIE'S PLACE



Visit the feline residents of Cookie's Place virtually by way of SCR's web-streaming Kitty Cam at www.shadowcats.net/kitty-cam/camera1-1g.html.

At press time, there are 28 cats in Cookie's Place, a collection of rooms and outdoor enclosures devoted to cats with feline leukemia. But the numbers change frequently, something that takes its toll on even the most seasoned veterinarians.

BY THE NUMBERS

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