



A Close-Up Look At People Who Matter : Cats' Hero, With All the Trappings

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MARCH 24, 1994 | 12 AM



SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Elyse Mayberry is perched in a van in a near-empty Chatsworth parking lot, staring ahead at a row of chain link fences and inhaling the wet, warm scent of cat food that fills the van.

She is waiting, as she has for many evenings in the past 25 years, to hear the metal snap of a cage spring shut behind one of the thousands of feral cats that roam Los Angeles.

In the years since she banded together a small group dedicated to helping the wild cat, Mayberry and her volunteers have trapped at least 700 cats to be spayed, neutered, vaccinated and relocated.

Mayberry, who had always thought of herself as a “dog person,” started feeding wild cats on the studio lot when she worked for 20th Century Fox in 1965.

In 1979, when Mayberry worked on the Warner Bros./Columbia Picture lots, a studio colleague showed her how to trap cats so they could be neutered and vaccinated.

Five years later, C.A.T.S. Inc., or Cats At The Studios, received its state and federal nonprofit status.

That way, Mayberry figured, if anyone wanted to give donations they could write it off on their taxes. Until then, volunteers had been paying for all the cats' food and medical

treatment from their own pockets. They still pay for much of it.

Trips to the veterinarian are predicated on having enough money to pay.

Mayberry, a small woman with close cropped gray hair and black framed glasses, retired in August from her marketing research job at the studios.

C.A.T.S. has branched out as well, trapping unwanted cats at industrial and business parks.

“When they trap, they trap in a humane manner,” said Gary Olsen, general manager of the city Department of Animal Regulation. “They take the animal out of a pretty serious environment. They inoculate the animal for disease, care for the animal and relocate the animal into a better environment--better not only for the cat but for the community, for the human population.”

At the Chatsworth complex, Mayberry and colleagues have trapped 27 cats and 16 kittens in eight months.

“There aren’t that many left now,” Mayberry says as she lifted a plastic water bottle to her mouth. “There are only about seven.’

But those seven are only remotely interested in the traps containing a buffet of cat treats on this weeknight.

“Sometimes we have to resort to Pioneer Chicken Strips. It has to smell really different. They won’t go into the trap for dry food,” Mayberry says. “Sometimes we resort to catnip and they get so carried away, they roll in the trap and spring it.”

But tonight even Chicken McNuggets aren’t working. Mayberry’s two traps are silent. Sherri Robinson, a volunteer sitting on the other side of the complex, is also having a

slow night.

A dark cat that has been loitering near the cage stretches his body to nearly twice its length and munches from the cage, his feet still inches from the spring that would ensnare him.

“Get in there you little sucker,” Mayberry hisses.

But the cat backs away, his mouth full of chicken.

Another trapper had offered to catch the unwanted cats, but Mayberry believed the trapper would have killed them. “Some people think it’s kinder to kill. But if you asked the cats, I think they’d opt for freedom,” Mayberry said.

Trapped kittens are tamed and given to adoptive families. But after five months in the wild, most cats are truly feral. Mayberry tries to find these cats homes at stables, where they can put their rat-catching abilities to use and where they don’t need to be tamed.

But no cats are signing on tonight.

“What we’re going to have to do is get mean and not feed them one night,” says Mayberry, who, with Robinson, makes sure the cats eat every night. “It breaks your heart to do that.”

For more information about C.A.T.S., call (818) 341-8936.

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