

Local group aims to tame cat overpopulation

Bobbie Samme'

Cat overpopulation has been a long-term issue in Florence County, but Cat Advocates hopes that over time the felines will become less of a burden to the community.

Cat Advocates is a nonprofit organization based in Florence that started as a trap-neuter-return (TNR) group and has grown to include fostering and adoption.

In TNR unowned cats are trapped, spayed or neutered, vaccinated and ear-tipped for future identification. The cats are then returned to the location where they were found. Kittens and friendly cats skip the ear tip, and stay at a cage-free, no-kill rescue until they find a forever home.

"The goal of our organization is first and foremost to humanely reduce the population of unowned cats. At the same time, we want to foster positive relationships between cats and communities," said Sarah Giddings, one of the group's founders. "We also strive to decrease the burden on shelters, develop community partnerships, and educate the public to peacefully co-exist with cats."

Giddings founded Cat Advocates in 2014 with Billy McCoy, a Florence resident who also wanted to help control the cat population.

According to Giddings, McCoy moved into an older home that had several feral cats living in the crawl space.

"He was taking them to the shelter, but after a

while he discovered they were being put down because they were not tame," explained Giddings. "He wanted to control the population without killing the cats. As a self-proclaimed 'cat lady,' I had always wanted to do something to help cats, but I never had the support or resources to make that leap.

"When I met Billy, he had made an appointment with Cats Anonymous in Green Bay and we

year, and she offers her services spaying and neutering the cats and giving rabies vaccinations."

VanLaarhoven says she is glad to help the organization.

"Cat Advocates is a very good program. I believe in their mission because feral cats are a definite problem for most towns. It's not just specific to Florence, most towns have a feral cat problem," said VanLaarhoven. "And if we do not get these cats

me to start working on raising money and trapping again, with the help of volunteer Christine Montgomery from Florence," said Giddings. "She has been an invaluable help."

According to Montgomery, her love of cats brought her to Cat Advocates.

"I wish I could do more, but I am home schooling my kids, so I don't have a lot of time," said Montgomery. "I do it because Sarah reminds me of my mother who also cared about cats, and I have always wanted to save them. It's hard to look away when you see a helpless creature in need. I help with trapping and bottle feeding the cats."

Giddings says Montgomery saved the kittens who were trapped in the wall. Those kittens are now neutered and vaccinated and living in a forever home. Giddings also credits Montgomery with saving two other kittens this summer.

"Bonnie and Lucy were kittens, also found in the Town of Florence, about five weeks old when they came to us," said Giddings. "They were basically dying. Their eyes were sealed shut with infection and they had severe upper respiratory infection.

"After about six weeks of treatments and TLC, they are healthy and thriving with partial vision, thanks to the dedication of Montgomery, their foster mom, and the excellent care provided by Dr. Kim. Of course, we couldn't have saved them



Two cats trapped in the town of Florence who were spayed and vaccinated through the Cat Advocates program.

without generous donations from the community." For more information about Cat Advocates or to



Cat Advocates co-founder Sarah Giddings with two female kittens found in a garage in the Town of Florence. The kittens and their feral mother have been in foster care and are now up for adoption.

"The goal of our organization is first and foremost to humanely reduce the population of unowned cats."
- Sarah Giddings, Cat Advocates

brought cats there to be "fixed" for a few months, but due to constraints of their grant funding, they had to limit the geographical area they were serving which made us ineligible for their services."

In 2015, McCoy and Giddings decided to take what they had learned from Cats Anonymous and start their own organization, sending out letters to every veterinarian in the area.

"Dr. Rocci Downs in Amberg agreed to help us out and was our first veterinary partner. We also work with The Fix is In, a mobile clinic based in Rhinelander," said Giddings. "We then retained Dr. Kim VanLaarhoven in Florence when she opened Nose to Tail in July this

spayed and neutered, we just keep getting more and more cats. So, I'm donating part of my time and efforts to be able to help them achieve their mission."

McCoy experienced some serious medical issues which forced him to slow down with the group, and ultimately shift his focus to other areas.

"I was a little lost without Billy, because I do have a full-time job in addition to Cat Advocates. He was a lot of the "boots on the ground" and I was more behind the scenes. He still helps when he can, but a lot more falls on me now. This summer I was contacted about some kittens stuck in a wall in the Town of Florence, and that motivated

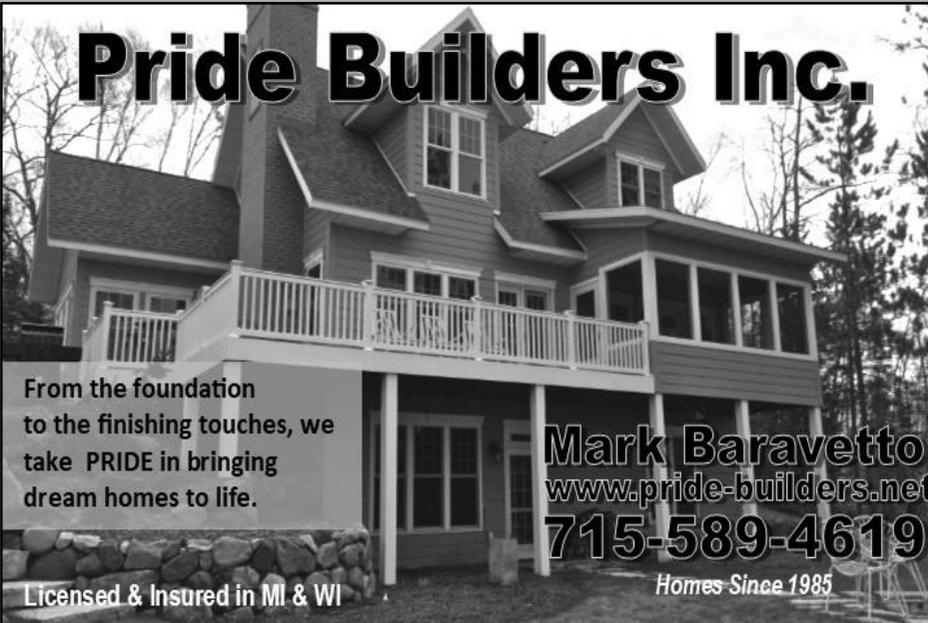
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