StMU alliance ministers to a special group of God’s creatures

BY CAROL BAASS SOWA
TODAY'S CATHOLIC

SAN ANTONIO • Bonnie and Clyde were successfully captured by a special “posse” at St. Mary’s University (StMU) on a Sunday evening in October. “The two felines were trapped in about half an hour,” reported an e-mail from the “head wrangler” to a growing list of interested parties.

The captured duo, four-pawed critters of the feline variety, were promptly whisked off for spaying/neutering, vaccinations, microchips and ear-tipping, before being released as part of the For Paws trap-neuter-return (TNR) program on campus.

Founded on the Catholic and Marianist belief that all life has value and should be treated with dignity and respect, For Paws’ two-fold mission is to improve the health and well-being of homeless cats on the StMU campus through long-term care and management, as well as educating the campus and surrounding community about responsible and humane relationships with animals who share our communities and our world.

For Paws got its start in 2003 when the university gave permission for a group of concerned persons on campus to initiate the TNR program in response to the increasing number of cats roaming and being fed on campus.

“Is there, as everyone knows, a terrible problem here in San Antonio with too many animals and not enough homes,” said Caroline Byrd, associate director of the StMU Louis J. Blume Library and co-director of For Paws. “So we’re trying to work, in our little corner of the universe, to change that.” The local animal control facility is still having to euthanize around 37,000 animals a year, she noted — not sick or injured animals, but homeless, abandoned pets and their offspring.

Comprised of StMU staff, faculty and students, For Paws’ TNR program is a non-profit, non-lethal means of controlling the feral and stray cat population. Trained volunteers maintain and monitor the cats to ensure a healthy colony, with socialized cats being adopted out as part of the program and the truly feral ones remaining on campus where they are fed by the group in a designated area. (One ear of the released feral cats is slightly clipped at the veterinarian’s to signify neutering.)

Studies have shown that a given area will reach a stable feral cat population, but removal of cats from an area creates a vacuum, with new cats moving in. “We are a struggling little area and it’s especially very hard times for everybody,” said Byrd. “Right now we are seeing what I call ‘left behind’ cats.”

About half the surrounding neighborhood is rental property, with a high turnover rate, and there is also an older population who can no longer look after pets or pass on, leaving them behind as well. Many are hard-pressed financially, so fail to have their animals spayed or neutered, while others are uninformed and don’t realize the need to do so in order to prevent a population explosion of unwanted animals.

Byrd noted three recent cats brought to the group were found scrounging for food on campus by students. “They’re friendly animals; they clearly were someone’s pets,” she said, adding they had obviously been abandoned when someone moved or could no longer afford to feed them.

“This is getting to be a real struggle for people,” she said. “And we’ve not seen the bottom of this for sure. We think we’re going to be quite busy the next couple of years.”

As of mid-December, 122 cats had gone through For Paws’ TNR program, with around 50 having been adopted out. Only about a dozen remain in the colony on campus, where they are watched after and fed by the group in a designated area. The remainder of the cats released through the program presumably disappear into the neighborhood, where they will at least no longer multiply.

Though For Paws has pretty much exhausted cat adoption possibilities among faculty and staff at this point, they discourage student adoptions, pointing out to the students that they will eventually be graduating and moving away. Students were at first wary of helping the new cat group on campus and Byrd learned earlier efforts by campus personnel to trap cats (which were then turned over the pound for euthanization) had failed because students were secretly releasing them from the traps.

“So we had to work really hard with the students,” she said, “to show we are not going to do that; we are going to take care of these cats.” The group speaks to students in the residence halls as part of their “one cat at a time” outreach, making them aware that they can be part of the solution to the problem of unwanted animals. They also maintain an e-mail list of over 140 interested persons.

One of the more memorable cat stories occurred on a hot summer day in 2007, when a groundskeeper dumped a brush discovered a mother cat and six kittens (one already dead) in a box in the dumpster by J.C. Keefe Field. He immediately contacted For Paws. The group was in for emergency medical treatment and fostered them eventually finding homes for all “The Dumpster Kittens,” as they were dubbed, and the lovely calico mother they named Hope. “It was ironic,” noted Byrd, “because they went to rather wealthy parts of town. These poor little West Side kittens, dumpster kittens, ended up doing quite well in life!”

Then there was Bevo, a wary orange and white cat Byrd tracked on campus for two years before finally managing to catch in one of the group’s three humane cage traps. An expert “cat trapper” at this point in the game, she had tried every conceivable kind of food to entice the furry fellow into the trap but luring him in with an aromatic can of mackerel.

Following a trip to the vet for the For Paws “basics,” this feral-to-the-core feline was released back on campus, where he still recognizes and regards his trapper with disdain when their paths cross.

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For Paws is not alone in their mission. Byrd credits the San Antonio Feral Cat Coalition for getting their group off to a good start training-wise.

Trinity University and UTSA also maintain feral cat colonies, she notes, and Our Lady of the Lake University is starting one. “We consider ourselves part of the larger animal rescue community here in San Antonio,” she said. “We’re working with a lot of other groups to make a difference here in any way we can.”

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