

FOSTER FOCUS

Emmie's 9th Life

A unique organization uses fostering and rescue efforts to save thousands of Maui's felines and one very special cat.

"THIS IS THE MAUI HUMANE SOCIETY calling. Someone trapped a cat and brought her here to be euthanized, but her I.D. tracks back to you. Do you want to come and get her?" the woman on the phone asked me. Alarmed and confused, I sprinted through the house and located my two cats before it registered that she was calling from Hawaii. I live in California, so what the heck was she talking about? "Well, this cat is a gray and black tabby who was caught at Sugar Cove, and I got your info from her ear-tattoo number," she said.

Then it hit me: She's talking about Emmie, a homeless cat who befriended me while I was on vacation in Hawaii a few years ago. Because I only had a few days in Maui, there wasn't enough time to foster her or find her a home, so I helped her as best I could by getting her spayed and vaccinated. I remember that just before I left for the airport, Emmie curled up on my lap and looked at me with her big, beautiful emerald eyes. "I'm sorry I have to leave you, but I promise you'll be fine," I told her.

My knees buckled as I whispered into the phone: "Please don't put her to sleep. She's a sweet cat and doesn't deserve to die."

Sadly, Emmie's situation isn't unique. Across the nation, animal advocates trap-neuter-return free-roaming cats to humanely control their population, but sometimes neighbors who don't want the cats around will drop them off at the nearest shelter. If the cats don't have microchips or other ID and no one claims them, they are evaluated. If deemed unadoptable (as most frightened free-roaming cats are), they're euthanized because shelters have nowhere to put them.

Luckily for Emmie, the shelter held her

for me for a few days, but how was I supposed to rescue and foster her 2,500 miles away? In a panic, I searched the Internet for rescue groups and frantically called every one of them on the island. I didn't have any luck because they're all overwhelmed. Each apologized and explained that there's an exploding feral cat population in Maui and only a small number of rescuers, so the island's foster parents have more cats than they can handle.

My last hope was Phyllis Tavares, the executive director of 9th Life Hawaii. From the organization's website, I learned that it's Maui's leader in the "no-kill/no more homeless pets" movement.

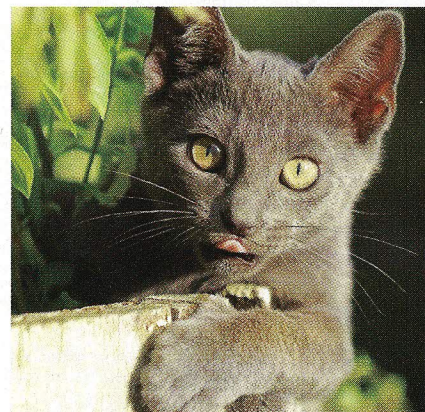
Tavares sighed heavily while listening to my breathless, impassioned recap of the situation. "It's just heartbreaking, but it doesn't surprise me," she said. "Out here there are pit bulls tied up on short chains, people leave their animals behind when they move, and I've even seen little children wearing T-shirts saying 'cockfighting is not a crime.'" Holding back tears, I asked her if 9th Life could take in Emmie and spare her from the sad fate that so many of Hawaii's animals suffer.

To learn more

about 9th Life Hawaii's spay/neuter clinics and the cats at its sanctuary, visit www.9thlifehawaii.org.

Sensing my despair, Tavares told me about 9th Life Hawaii's incredible work to help Maui's cats. At their private sanctuary hidden in a lush tropical jungle, she and her team of volunteers care for about 300 resident cats every day and foster felines they hope to adopt into loving homes.

"Our focus is to provide free or low-cost spay/neuter for Maui cats and reduce the kill rate at the shelter, which is horribly high; 7 out of 10 animals that go in there are euthanized, and most of them are cats," she said. Recently, they took in 120



Life is a balancing act for Maui's free-roaming cats, but not for Mr. Spock, who has a new home thanks to 9th Life Hawaii.

pre-weaned kittens from Maui Humane Society; volunteers work around the clock to foster the kittens and rehabilitate those

who are ill. Tavares is especially proud that 9th Life Hawaii has sterilized nearly 2,000 cats at their free and low-cost spay/neuter clinics. If they receive enough donations — a particularly difficult challenge due to Maui's depressed economy — they plan to help thousands more by staging additional high-volume spay/neuter clinics.

Although I was awed by Tavares' Herculean efforts to create a no-kill island and help so many cats, my thoughts were consumed with saving just one: Emmie. I said silent prayers that her team could foster the sweet tabby, and if Emmie couldn't find a home, that maybe 9th Life could take care of her at their sanctuary — I could try to raise funds to pay for her lifetime care there.

As if reading my mind, Tavares said, "Don't worry, we'll take in Emmie. We'll save her." Tears of relief rolled down my cheeks. I sent a whisper across the ocean that I hoped Emmie could hear: "I promised that you'd be fine, and you will be soon, my little friend." 🐾



Cimeron Morrissey is an animal rescuer, an award-winning writer, co-founder of Project Bay Cat and Animal Planet's 2007 Cat Hero of the Year.