

Tracy's Cat House

by Frederick Wickert



The terrible edict was announced in November of 2006. The trailer park in Gilboa, NY on State Route 30 had to close down. The County health department decreed that it was no longer habitable. The sewage system was incapable of handling the waste from the trailers. Just a few years before at great expense, the sewer system had been renovated and expanded, but the soil, hardpan clay, just refused to accept it. The health department said it was not repairable and must be shut down permanently. All occupants of the trailer park were ordered to be out in thirty days.

The location of the trailer park was out in the open on a windswept plain. There was a hedgerow on one side of it, but that was more to hide it from the adjacent hay field than to afford protection from the wind. The site in the winter was fiercely cold.

It was not a well-kept trailer park and the trailers themselves, for the most part were not very good ones. The residents of the trailer park with a few exceptions were poor folk. The trailers some of them lived in were in such poor condition they could not be moved without falling apart. Many of them had sheds added on to them. A few were newer and in better condition and could be moved. Some had been emptied and partially torn apart with doors and windows missing from them.

Many of the residents of the trailer park had pet cats. The most of the cats were allowed to roam free as they wished and in addition, a colony of feral cats had grown there as well. The residents often fed their cats outside and the feral cats helped themselves.

When the people were forced to move out on short notice, they had no place to go. They had not planned to move and had never prepared for such an eventuality. Many of them were elderly and were frightened, not knowing what to do. Most searched for apartments. Not many apartments were available, though there were some. Most apartment landlords did not allow pets.

Desperate for a place to live and unable to bring their pets, many of these residents simply abandoned their cats, unable or unwilling to take them to an animal shelter. Besides, the animal shelters were bursting at the seams with cats and did not want to accept them, saying there was no room.

My friend Tracy informed me in December of what was going on. Tracy had begun providing feed and water for the cats, placing the pans under the abandoned trailers. The cats were going inside of abandoned trailers that had doors missing for shelter. They were terribly frightened and a few gradually began to come near when Tracy put food out for them. It took increasingly large quantities of food to provide for them. It is suspected that some raccoons and perhaps some skunks had discovered it and were helping themselves.

Tracy had taken in a number of cats and already had about sixteen of them in her house. She knew that I also had a large number of feral cats we had provided a home for. She asked me for help to try to save those trailer park cats. I agreed to help. Financially, both Tracy and I were struggling as it was, but we could not leave those cats to starve, and when the park was cleared out, we could not leave them in the open like that without shelter.

I began trapping some of the cats until there was no longer a place to take them after they were trapped. Tracy found another couple that also helped. We were able to get a few donations of cat food and one or two gave a few dollars to help. It wasn't enough.

We began to call upon animal organizations for help. The previous summer, Tracy had helped the Humane Society raise over \$1200 and sponsored a successful adoption clinic for them. They refused to help. Another outfit called Alley cat Allies agreed to help at first. As soon as they learned how many cats were involved, they backed out. They implied that Tracy should forget about it, that it was an impossible task.

Tracy, myself and the other couple refused to give up. We were determined to save those cats. I sent a plea to all my e-mail buddies for help. Many responded, including some of the members of Ourecho. In total, I

received donations of nearly \$400. It helped a lot and without it, I don't know how we could have managed, but we did. All in all, there were about forty-six cats to be rescued.

Cats killed four of them before they could be caught. The others were divided between Tracy and the other couple. We had so many already that we could not handle any more. A few were adopted after they had shots and were spayed or neutered. Some of them were returned, excuses being that landlords or spouses refused to allow them to stay.

Being desperate for a place to keep them, Tracy put them in her basement. There was very little light there and the basement was damp and dank. Ventilation was poor and the floor flooded during periods of heavy rain. They had shelves to get up on as well as the basement stairs to keep out of the water, and there was a sump pump, but the pump could not handle it all. Tracy knew she had to do something else. She and her husband had already bought a large shed to store the belongings they had been keeping in the basement.

Tracy worked day and night, cleaning houses as well as her daytime job. She got very little sleep and her marriage suffered. She refused to give in. She saved up \$4,000 and drew up a sketch of what she had in mind. Her uncle is in the building business and she showed it to him. He discussed it with her and came up with some very good ideas on his own. He took the sketch and some notes he had made, home with him. He went on the computer and designed a real nice cathouse.

When her uncle showed Tracy the plans for the new cathouse, Tracy told her uncle that she feared it was too elaborate. She loved it, but only had \$4,000 to spend on it. Her uncle told her not to worry. He had some left over material he thought he could use and he was not going to charge her for the work he did, but only for the men he hired to work on it with him. He believed it could be done for eight or nine thousand, but she could pay him when she could. She has since paid him an additional \$800.

Work began on the building in her back yard. Her husband was concerned it was going to increase their tax assessment. He was skeptical at first but as work progressed he became interested in it. Her uncle assigned two men to work on it. Unfortunately he was unable to put much time in it as he was very busy with his business, and then he took a ten-day vacation with his wife to California.

Eventually, the cathouse was almost completed. Some electric wiring remains to be done and switches, outlets and lighting to be installed. The cats in the basement were all getting respiratory infections and it was imperative they be moved out of the basement.

The cathouse is insulated, has a vinyl floor for easy cleaning, a separate room for litter boxes and storage of supplies. It has a wire-enclosed porch for the cats to be outside for fresh air whenever they please. There are windows, and the entrance has two doors to prevent escape. The problem is, the wiring is not yet complete and the cost has now overrun to \$18,000. How will she ever pay for it? In addition, her husband has had two surgeries this summer, and has been out of work for most of the summer, causing a loss of badly needed income.

I told her I will donate a \$100 heater but it will take two more for a building that size during the winter months. She will have to get the other two. Some people, when they learn what she has done, tell her, "You're crazy. You're a nut. Who is going to do something like that just for a bunch of cats?"

When confronted with these things, Tracy just smiles determinedly, and replies, "I do what I have to do, and it is what it is." She is determined to see it through and has faith that some way, some how she will get it done.

A few others and myself have helped as much as they could. Much more help is needed. Tracy has great spirit and faith and refuses to accept defeat. She believes in the old adage, "where there is a will, there is a way."

If anyone who reads this story has a desire to help her to defray the expenses of taking care of all the cats, 34 of them in the cat house and 19 of them in her home, 53 in all, they may send a donation to Tracy Mattice, P.O. Box 401, Grand Gorge, NY 12434. The costs of vet care, food and kitty litter is enormous, and there still remains the building to be paid for.