

New Milford Animal Welfare Society gets its very own home after 26 years

By Beth Hamilton
STAFF REPORTER

When someone from the Animal Welfare Society helped Ruth Young trap a family of wild cats roaming around her Bridgewater property, she never forgot the favor.

Now, many years later, the money Mrs. Young bequeathed to the Animal Welfare Society has manifested itself in a \$400,000 building on Dodd Road in New Milford – the first home ever for the 26-year-old organization.

"She was a true animal lover and she remembered us," said Margaret Giovannone, co-chairperson of the Animal Welfare Society. "Without her donation the animal shelter would not have been built."

Monday, the spacious building that will house 20 dogs and a whole host of cats, opened for the first time. Brookfield resident Renee Gardner was in charge of getting everything set up and the animals moved in.

"Before this, we had to board our animals at kennels and animal hospitals and pay the regular boarding fees, as well as any medical costs," said Mrs. Gardner, a four-year volunteer who will be working full-time at the new shelter. "That gets very expensive."

The Animal Welfare Society, which is an independent organization and receives no local or state funding, serves New Milford,

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Brookfield, Bridgewater and Roxbury.

In addition to finding homes for stray or abandoned animals, the society buys dogs impounded by the state so they won't be put to sleep after seven days – the state's time limit for dogs not claimed by their owners.

The society will not destroy dogs or cats if they cannot be placed in a home after a certain time limit, Mrs. Giovannone said.

"Euthanasia is *not* the answer – spaying and neutering is," she said Monday. "It's very difficult to take a healthy animal into a vet and put it down just because it was born."

"It's not just older animals either," she said. "For every one kitten or puppy that lives, there are seven or eight that die."

Monday, animals who had just made their way into the new Animal Welfare Society building were still getting used to their spacious new quarters.

In both the cat and kitten rooms there are individual cages for the animals, as well as large group areas with plenty of play room and shelves running alongside windows for cats to sun themselves on.

The dogs also have sizeable cages, with easy access to fenced-in outside areas for running.

"It's such a switch for most of these animals, who have been cooped up for months," Mrs. Gardner said. "Here, they're still in cages but there's room to play."

For every cat and dog that makes it to the shelter and has a brighter future to look forward to, there seems to be a bad-luck story somewhere in the animal's past.

One cat that almost came to an sad and untimely death was Polly, a stray 1-year-old that just gave birth to a black kitten named Solo.

Mrs. Gardner said Polly was so malnourished when the society received her volunteers feared she wouldn't live, let alone give birth to a healthy litter. As it was, the cat only produced one kitten because of her malnourishment.

"The lady that had taken her in said a neighbor suggested her kids put the cat in the road and let it get run over," Mrs. Gardner said, watching Polly nurse the 1-week-old Solo.

"The woman's own cats were beating Polly up and she was afraid for her, so she called us," she said. "Now look at her. She's doing great."

The Animal Welfare Society is reliant upon the donations it receives for the animals – which is \$55 for dogs, \$50 for long-haired cats and \$40 for short-haired cats – and other fund raising activities.

The price of the animal includes distemper and rabies shots, leukemia and heartworm testing, worming and spaying or neutering, Mrs. Giovannone said. The society also pays for any other medical bills the animal incurs before it is placed.

The only time the society will put an animal to sleep is if its medical condition cannot be treated, she said.

Mrs. Giovannone said dog owners should always put tags on their pets because it will help ensure the animal is returned quickly if it becomes lost.

If a dog is lost, pet owners should immediately contact all the dog wardens in their area, keep in contact with those wardens and have a picture of their animal handy for identification purposes, she said.

The Animal Welfare Society will be open for adoptions Tuesday through Sunday, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

"We're hoping the Sunday hours will accommodate families who would like to shop for a animal together," Mrs. Gardner said. "Finding the right pet takes some time."



Staff photograph by TONI FINCH KELLAR

Renee Gardner, Animal Welfare Society's full-time employee at its new building on Dodd Road in New Milford, holds some playful kittens at the shelter Monday.