

NEW MILFORD



36-7

Pick of the litter

There are plenty of options for volunteering in town

06776 is a picture of New Milford drawn from everyday people and places.

You've head of Batman, now meet Catman.

That would be Bill Matty, a 39-year-old volunteer with a knack for turning frightened strays into friendly pets.

Every Wednesday and Friday, Bill spends six hours in Catworld, the feline center at the Animal Welfare Society headquarters on Dodd Road.

These days, with people eager to shout their patriotism, Bill serves his country quietly. He's one of more than 2,000 New Milford residents who volunteer in dozens of community organizations. Most of those groups would welcome more volunteers.

Bill cleans the cat rooms and litter boxes, does laundry, brushes the cats and plays with them. It's all part of getting the animals ready for adoption — and the cats love it.

"They're so excited to see him they all run to the front window — even the shy ones — when they see him coming," said Renee Gardner, the shelter's manager.

Catman has a more humble explanation for the cats' behavior.

"When they see me, they know it means food," he said.

When a new cat arrives, Bill knows which ones will be difficult.

"You can tell right away. They growl, they scratch at you. You know you'll have to spend a little more time with them," he said.

Bill begins by talking with them while they're locked in their cage. Later he opens the door a little, the first step in getting gradually closer to the animal. Before long, he's grooming them.

"He's very good at socializing the cats," Renee said.

She added that the shelter couldn't exist without volunteers like Bill.

"We have a staff of two or three people and 45 volunteers. We meet the basics, but we rely on volunteers for the rest," she said. The volunteers collect food, care for animals and staff the office.

"They're a tremendous help," Renee said.

There are, literally, dozens of other local organizations that could use more volunteers. Schools, scout groups, service clubs and emergency services are always looking for more helpers.

"Two-thirds of our calls are during the day, when most of our volunteers are working," said Donna Hesse, former chief of New Milford Community Ambulance. The organization can always use certified emergency workers, but it's also looking for ways that others people can contribute.

"The vehicles have to be washed and maintained, there are lots of things people could do," she said.

Mary Peitler, director of the Visiting Nurse Association and Hospice, said volunteers are a basic part of the Hospice philosophy.



Joe Hurley



News-Times photos/Wendy Carlson

William Matty, above, gets to know the personalities of most of the cats that are kept at the Animal Welfare Society on Dodd Road. Pat Bates, below at left, and Bidly Roger, below at right, volunteer at Loaves and Fishes in New Milford.



▷ Opportunities to volunteer

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"It really does make Hospice much more of a community organization," Mary said. Volunteers often build strong bonds with the dying person and their family, she said.

"Now is an excellent time to get started," she said, noting that the annual training course for caregivers begins in a few months.

Hospice and VNA have volunteers in a number of other positions such as clerical, fund-raising and aides at clinics.

If your tastes run to government, you might consider volunteering for a political party. There's a shortage of people willing to run for office, especially the less glamorous posts.

"Anyone who wants to see how the political system works or who wants to take their beliefs into making the town better," should think about volunteering," said Republican Town Committee

chairman Peter Bass.

Sheldon Pruss, the Democratic chairman, said newcomers are more than welcome, not only as candidates but for many other roles.

Pat Hembrook, who has worked on more than a half dozen community projects, said organizations that don't have enough help run the risk of overusing the few who volunteer.

"Nobody should have to do everything," she said.

Last year, Hembrook volunteered to help with the town's New Year's celebration, but wound up as the de-facto chairman because no one else wanted the job. She won't do that again.

Hembrook also helps organize the Women's Club's annual Thanksgiving food baskets.

"We'll need people to help pick up the food and to help put the baskets together the Tuesday before Thanksgiving," she said.

There are several other

Women's Club projects that people can volunteer for, even if they're not members, she said.

The bottom line folks, is: The real test of patriotism may be closer to home than you think.

Here are a few organizations you can contact: The Lions Club, New Milford Hospital, Red Cross, Hospice-VNA, Women's Club, Rotary, A New England New Year, Senior Center, public library, community ambulance, Garden Club, Knights of Columbus, Village Fair Days, Housatonic-Shepaug United Way, boy scouts and girl scouts, any of the town's schools, volunteer fire companies or churches.

There are more organizations. Contact the New Milford office of The News-Times and Spectrum for information.

Do you know someone who has a story to tell? Contact Joe Hurley at 45B Main St., New Milford 06776 or call (860)-354-2274. E-mail: jhurley@newstimes.com.