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## Special-needs cats make good pets, too

Cheri March, The News Messenger



Karina Williams/The News Messenger

Jen Paul, shelter manager at FieldHaven, plays with Red, an orange tabby who suffers from the herpes virus.

Stress has taken its toll on longtime FieldHaven resident Red. The strains of shelter life might have caused the orange tabby's infection with feline herpes, the virus that sometimes leaves his eyes pink with sores and diminishes his chances for adoption.

But, with a little extra care, cats such as Red can still make good pets, said Jen Paul, a manager at the Lincoln cat rescue sanctuary.

"Red is just a regular cat," she said. "Stress is the only thing that brings out the virus."

Feline herpes is not transferable to humans, she said. And though Red will always have the virus, it could stay dormant in a stable environment.

Besides Red and Allegra - a herpes-infected Bengal who likely contracted the virus from being constantly caged at a breeder's facility - FieldHaven looks after cats with feline leukemia, paralysis, incontinence and feline immunodeficiency virus, the feline version of HIV.

"We're having a hard time adopting these special-needs cats," said Lorraine Davis, a FieldHaven volunteer.

Davis is currently seeking a home for foster cat, Duchess, an 18-month-old Tuxedo with FIV.

"In doing my investigating, I found most people have a wrong view of what the sickness is," Davis said. "If a cat isn't symptomatic - especially with FIV - it's still very adoptable."

Cats can contract FIV from their mothers at birth, or via deep bite wounds from an infected feline. Like the human version, FIV weakens a cat's immune system over time. But, though it is ultimately fatal, infected cats can live years without showing symptoms. Duchess isn't showing signs of the virus.

"She lets me pet her, she has a good appetite and she's non-symptomatic," Davis said. "I just love her to death. She's just a very docile, friendly, quiet and sweet cat."

Because there is a chance FIV could be transmitted to other cats, Duchess would be best off in a one-cat household, or with other FIV-positive housemates.

Paul theorized that the best adopters have something in common with their special-needs pet.

The phenomenon is especially noticeable with FIV-positive cats, she said, which are increasingly being adopted by gay men and women.

"Because the gay community has lived with HIV for so long, I think there is maybe an understanding," she said. "Maybe somebody with herpes, too, would better understand (Red and Allegra)."

One of FieldHaven's most extreme special needs cases is Hot Rod, a 6-month-old calico Manx.

Due to a genetic defect, Hot Rod is incontinent and does not know when to empty her bladder.

Otherwise a healthy, particularly playful kitten named for her tendency to zip around the shelter, Hot Rod must have her bladder expressed three times a day.

"She might never get adopted," Paul said. "There are places that would put her down. I don't badmouth them - they do the best they can. But we're a no-kill shelter." Paul said an ideal owner for Hot Rod would have time to devote to the kitten's needs and might be medically trained - a veterinarian for example.

FieldHaven's own veterinarian is performing acupuncture on the kitten in hopes that it will help her someday overcome the disability.

Besides medical maladies, certain cats - like older or socially shy animals - are notoriously difficult to adopt.

Fieldhaven recently rescued an 11-year-old cat whose owner died - a common scenario, Davis said.

"He lived with this woman his whole life," Davis said. "It was the only home he'd ever known. Most people don't want to adopt a cat already 10 or 11 years old."

But a mature cat - likely to be more calm than playful - might be a perfect fit for an older person looking for companionship.

On the other end of the age spectrum is kitten Felipe, who was caught with other feral cats, but seems willing to interact with humans.

"Normally, feral cats are just thrown right into a barn," Davis said. "But this is a cat that, with socialization, can be adopted."

In most cases, even cats with issues can thrive with the right health care and a safe, loving environment, Davis said.

"I think people are afraid to make the commitment (to special-needs cats)," she said. "But these cats can live very productive lives."

For more information about FieldHaven, call 434-6022 or go online at [www.fieldhaven.com](http://www.fieldhaven.com).

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