

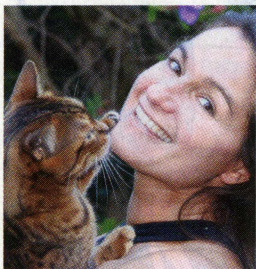
A Walk on the Wild Side



COURTESY OF KATHY FIEBEK

Mike Phillips and Valerie Sicignano with two rescued kittens

Valerie Sicignano tames the streets of New York City and beyond, one kitten at a time.



BY CIMERON MORRISSEY

Have you found a feral kitten and don't know what to do? Visit www.nycferalcat.org to read about Valerie's proven kitten socialization techniques and to view Urban Cat League's comprehensive video tutorial "Tough Love: Socializing Feral Kittens."

There was a time when Valerie Sicignano was afraid to walk the streets of New York City. Every time she left the house, she found kittens wherever she went: in bushes, behind restaurants, in abandoned buildings. In one week alone in the early 1990s, Sicignano found and rescued 200 kittens by herself. That inspired her to start a mission to curb the endless stream of homeless felines and to encourage and teach others how to foster and tame feral kittens themselves.

"When I first rescued and took in feral kittens 20 years ago, I did a lot of things wrong," Sicignano says. "I had no one to ask at the time, since there wasn't anyone who knew what to do back then. I started seeing that it's much better to spend my time neutering the adults and putting them back out than to keep rounding up their kittens over and over again. And I learned techniques to more effectively tame the kittens that I rescued, so I could adopt them out more quickly."

These realizations turned her into a professional kitten tamer and a trap-neuter-return (TNR) expert. Her dedication to animals earned her two high-profile jobs: Director of Programs for the New York City Feral Cat Initiative and East Coast Director for In Defense of Animals.

Even though Sicignano's hard-won socialization techniques helped her transform hundreds of kittens from terrified felines into affectionate domesticated cats, she felt she could make an even greater impact by teaching her skills to others. She

began first by counseling people over the phone, and then by offering classes. She and Mike Phillips, co-founder and president of Urban Cat League, now travel the country together to teach workshops. They have educated more than 500 people, who have in turn helped thousands of kittens by using the workshop's techniques.

"Valerie was self-taught, so she shows people that anyone can do this," Phillips says. "She teaches people to start thinking like a cat."

Sicignano also actively advocates TNR as a solution to humanely reduce the number of homeless cats on the streets. "We're working on making New York the second no-kill city in the country by preventing friendly cats and kittens from coming in to [shelters] and by promoting TNR to curb the growth of feral cat populations. This is a big part of the solution," Sicignano says.

The efforts are paying off. According to the Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals, Inc., 64 percent of the cats in 451 registered managed colonies now are spayed and neutered. This has stabilized the colonies and precipitated a 25 percent decline in the number of feral cats in them. It also has resulted in a noticeable reduction in the number of unwanted kittens. More than 3,000 kittens and cats have been rescued from these colonies, socialized and adopted into permanent homes.

"Valerie is one of those people who says 'I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I'm going to do it.' She takes it one step further by not just doing it herself, but by teaching others," Phillips says. "If we had more self-starters like Valerie in the animal movement, the world would be a better place."

Sicignano's two decades of rescue work have made an indelible impact on thousands of animals' lives, as well as her own. "Now I can leave the house, and I don't have to worry about finding kittens all over the place. It's a great feeling!" ○

Cimeron Morrissey is a cat rescuer, writer and Animal Planet's 2007 Cat Hero of the Year. She also is a member of the board of directors of Homeless Cat Network, a no-kill feline rescue organization in the San Francisco Bay Area.