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STREET LEVEL/Prospect Heights; Before Bulldozers, The Sound Of Purring

By JAKE MOONEY

IT was a little after 6 on an icy Saturday night, and the makeshift trap, a three-foot-square box made of wood and netting, had been propped up on a stick next to an empty lot in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, for 20 minutes. A 40-foot purple string ran from the stick, along the sidewalk, into the window of a red Mazda, where Laura Brahm was holding the other end.

Ms. Brahm is the executive director of Slope Street Cats, a nonprofit group of two dozen volunteers who were in the process of moving a colony of 11 feral cats from a lot at Dean Street and Vanderbilt Avenue that is part of the proposed Atlantic Yards development by Forest City Ratner.

There are hundreds of thousands of feral cats in the city. Slope Street Cats, an organization founded in 2004, usually traps, neuters and releases them as a means of population control. But in this corner of Brooklyn, where the Atlantic Yards project stands to turn much of the area into a giant construction site, moving this particular colony has become a special cause. The group's efforts were first reported in *The Brooklyn Paper*, a local weekly.

A new home for the area's feral cats had been arranged in a backyard a few blocks away, and 9 of the 11 cats were already holed up in a brick shed there. All that remained were two short-haired black-and-white holdouts, whom members of the group had named Eleanor Roosevelt and Mamie Eisenhower.

The animals did not take long to appear, edging under a chain-link fence to nibble on a trail of rotisserie chicken and dry cat food leading to the trap. Eleanor Roosevelt stepped under the cage toward a plate of food, but Mamie Eisenhower hung back. Ms. Brahm paused for a moment, decided that one cat was better than none, and yanked the string.

All at once, the cat was trapped. Ms. Brahm, a Web editor at the Open Society Institute, and her boyfriend, Corey Robin, an associate professor of political science at the City University of New York, who had been sitting in the passenger seat, sprang from the car, transferred the cat to a metal cage, stuffed the cage into the back seat and set up the trap again.

Mamie Eisenhower, having been present for all this, was harder to catch. Ms. Brahm's group had laid the groundwork, clearing snow away from the fence to make access to the trap easier, and persuading neighborhood people not to leave food for the cats. Still, feral cats are unpredictable.

"We had many nights when they would eat all the bait going up to the trap and never go into the trap," Ms. Brahm said. "It's just a waiting game. You just have to wait them out until they're hungry enough to risk going into the trap."

At 7:15, about an hour after Eleanor Roosevelt came in from the cold, Mr. Robin called in an order to a local soul food place. "You know, we should get a lot of fried chicken," Ms. Brahm said. "Then we can use it as bait."

At 8:20, under the glow of streetlights, two young couples passed on the sidewalk, then looked at the trap and stopped short, quizzical eyes following the purple string back to the car.

"A lot of people, they're so New York, it's like nothing fazes them," Ms. Brahm said. "But then you get some people doing double-takes. We did get one drunk guy who walked by and kicked the thing over."

At 8:58, Mamie Eisenhower poked her head out under the fence but skittered away when another young couple, both with shaggy hair and skinny jeans, parked a car in front of the lot, stepped out for a cigarette, then sat down and blasted the stereo.

"God, just go," Mr. Robin grumbled. "This is really the downside of all of this: the Brooklyn hipster."

Around 9:30, the pair left. The cat returned awhile later but never came close to the trap. At 10:15, the stakeout crew packed up for the night and drove Eleanor Roosevelt to the shed where the rest of her colony was staying.

The woman who owns the shed is a supporter of the project, Ms. Brahm said, and was happy to offer it. "Her son is very excited about the idea of having 10 cats in his backyard," she added.