

Kitten rescued from truck engine adopted

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LAS CRUCES - Las Cruces firefighter Gordon Nelson had just finished helping extinguish a building fire on Picacho Avenue with his crew.

As their tanker headed to the downtown Zeffiro Pizzeria location for some lunch on the afternoon of Dec. 14, they came across a red Ford F-150 pickup truck at the intersection of Water Street and Griggs Avenue. Its hood was open and a distraught man and woman were peering into the crevices of the engine.

"We didn't know if they were broke down, or what the problem was," recalled Nelson, a 33-year-old lieutenant who has been with the department for 10 years. "We just saw a couple with the hood up. So we went to help them out."

As the firefighters approached the couple - a mother and her grown son - to offer help, the woman surprised them with a question that had nothing to do with vehicle problems.

"I asked them: 'Don't you get kittens out of trees?'" the woman, 63-year-old Rebecca Luker, recalled during a recent phone interview from her home in Guthrie, Okla.

Luker was in town that day to pick up her son Grant Aguirre, an attorney and New Mexico State University graduate student, so she could accompany him home for a recently found job. But when firefighters surveyed the peculiar situation, they soon realized there was one more personality involved with the roadside dilemma: a gray and white kitten that had stowed away in the pickup's engine.

The kitten - yowling from deep in the truck - had startled Luker and Aguirre as they were midway through their drive to the recycling center on Amador Road.

"I said, 'Grant, I hear something, I hear something.' I said 'Pull over! There is a cat under the hood,'" Luker recalled. They pulled over, hopped out of the cab, popped the hood, and saw the kitten in a tangle of wires, deep in the engine, and burrowing deeper in fright.

An animal control officer - whom Aguirre had been called - soon arrived, together with a curious elderly couple attracted by the hubbub. Officials from the Ford Motor Company were on the phone line with Aguirre, who had called them for instructions on which wires could be unplugged and which ones should be untouched during the effort to extract the young cat.

"It was really so sweet, here are all these big, grown men standing around trying to figure out how to get this little kitten out," Luker said.

The group set to work - "in a coordinated effort," said Nelson - to expunge the kitten. With firefighters taking positions at the sides and top the engine, the animal control officer at the bottom of the truck, Ford officials on the phone line, and the kitten somewhere in the middle, the kitten was softly poked, tugged, squirted with small streams of water, through pipes, gears and wires, until it was finally pulled out.

There was something different about the little rescued cat, Nelson said.

"When you rescue cats, they normally claw at you," he said. "Usually they come out ferociously tearing at you. But this one was not scratching or clawing. He popped out thankful. He was a thankful, well-behaved kitten."

After the rescue group had its time petting the female kitten, into the animal control carrier box it went, prompting a reaction from Luker.

"I said to them: 'Please tell me you are not going to kill this kitten, after all this. Please don't let them put it to sleep,'" she said.

Ernest Jimenez, the animal control officer who responded to the call, was not sure what to say to her.

"I was telling her that is not up to me, that once we drop it off at the animal shelter, it's totally out of our control what happens to them next," Jimenez recalled, and added, "It was right before the holidays. Everybody is all sentimental."

The female kitten was adopted hours after arriving to the animal shelter. Sita, as she is now named, is fitting in well with her new family, say her owners.

"She is really sweet, and feisty. She likes to play a lot," said 18-year-old Marissa Moreno, Sita's new owner from Fresno, Calif., who came to Las Cruces with her mom a month ago. They were looking for a family house cat and found their match at the animal shelter.

"I love cats and I wanted a little kitty. She really likes it here. She likes climbing the Christmas tree and laying down in it," Moreno said.

Luker, who said she has been thinking of the cat's fate since she returned to Oklahoma, is relieved to learn that the kitten now has a home.

"I have been concerned with someone adopting it. And knowing that makes me feel so good," she said.

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