

On the Positive Side: WHEN GARY MET SOLEST

By Gary Gail For the Sun-News

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As a volunteer at the Animal Services Center of Las Cruces, I showed up for work one Sunday last summer. Deciding on impulse to come in the back entrance, I was startled to discover a young black cat in a cage. In the night someone had dropped the cat off - let's face it, dumped it - without informing the shelter staff.

Now in the blazing sun, without food or water, the cat was in trouble. In the opinion of the staff veterinarian the cat would have died within the hour if left undiscovered.

Together I and the shelter staff worked to bring the cat's core body temperature down as she lay unconscious. They examined her injuries: all four paws were torn and bleeding as a result of her trying to escape the cage; a welt over one eye was unexplained.

I watched over the cat all day, as she recovered in the medical wing under observation. Reviving, she revealed a responsive and affectionate self. I committed himself to giving her a forever home, as soon as she was recovered enough to leave the shelter.

The torn feet required several weeks of treatment. I continued this treatment even after the cat received a medical clearance. I visited the cat at the Animal Services Center every day.

Now it was time for her to have a name. Her name, Solest, carries a reminder of the sun that almost killed her. It is a reminder of the fate of many animals turned out into the desert to fend for themselves.

I like the challenge of training a cat to walk on a lead, and claim success with "most cats." I begin by getting the cat used to the harness (never a collar). After a week or so, I attach the lead and let the cat play and get used to the feel of it. Rewarding with treats and praise also helps.

I find that taking the cat outside on a leash will give the cat a new outlook on life, at the same time remaining safe and in control. Sharing such outings increases the bond between the cat and the owner. As a cat learns to associate her beloved person with a trip outside, some will race to the door when they see the harness come out and will stand at the door waiting.

In her new home, Solest shares life with seven other cats. On a leash, with me at the other end, she enjoys the freedom of a secure back yard.

Is this life unimaginably glorious, out of the ordinary? Or is it an everyday thing, when a cat is rescued? Solest has traveled a vast distance since that stifling cage. Her destination might have been very different if I had used the front door that day.

Gary Gail has been a volunteer in animal shelters throughout the country for more than 20 years. He fosters sick and neglected cats and continues as a volunteer at the Animal Services Center in Las Cruces.