

A place to bloom



*Home for Life's powerful impact on the
lives of abandoned cats and kittens*

Cats on Ice

The cats were curious about the kitten outside in the snow. The dilute calico appeared frail, cold, and hungry, hardly a year old. She watched them, safe and warm inside with their human family, but she couldn't breach the sliding glass door that separated her from them.

The family was moved by the distress of the kitten that they called Gertie and searched the lost pet platforms for calicos but found none resembling her. They next sought advice from rescues in the area. The rescuers' consensus was that the kitten was likely feral, and they recommended leaving her outside while providing food, water, and perhaps some kind of shelter. Yet this family felt that Gertie had clearly been a pet at one time because she seemed to know about "inside,"

and the comforts of a home with people. They didn't want to leave her outside alone, to face her fate in the cold. So, they continued calling around for advice and support until they reached Home for Life.®

We told the family that it was best to follow their gut sense about Gertie. At our urging, they collected the kitten and took her to a vet to get a full picture of her situation. It turned out that Gertie was indeed a tame house cat who had somehow been abandoned. However, during the time she had spent outside, she had contracted feline leukemia, a contagious virus for cats. Crucially, she needed a home where she would not infect other cats.



MATCHING GIFT OPPORTUNITY:

Gifts made before September 15, 2026, will be matched up to \$20,000!

In many ways, Gertie was lucky. Twenty years prior, cats who were leukemia positive were often euthanized outright to help stem the spread of the disease. In a way, that policy seemed to make sense. However, Home for Life® asked, wasn't it possible to remove the cats from the population without having to euthanize them? In truth, they just needed a safe place to live away from other infected cats. And even without the complication of a virus, Gertie was facing a tragic, inevitable outcome: exposure and starvation if left outside.

Nine Lives—the Special Role of a Sanctuary

Gertie is exactly the sort of cat we had in mind when we founded Home for Life® sanctuary. We provide loving, lifelong care to dogs and cats who are unlikely or unable to be adopted, including cats and kittens positive for leukemia. Our program has inspired other rescue groups to re-evaluate what can be done for these special animals. For example, we have demonstrated through our loving care of vulnerable cats like Gertie that the diagnosis of leukemia should not be an automatic death sentence when cats are otherwise in good health, but rather a call to look for places where the cat can live safely without spreading the disease.

This creative approach to helping the most vulnerable dogs and cats has distinguished Home for Life® for over 25 years. Today Gertie lives safely with other leukemia positive cats at Home for Life® sanctuary, with plenty of food, and a warm cattery with heated floors. Gertie still loves to hop through her cat door to the large, attached outdoor cat run, but she doesn't have to beg at a window anymore to get back inside!



Home for Life is a qualified non-profit 501(c)(3) organization and all gifts are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. A person may obtain or request a copy of our current financial and/or registration information of Home For Life, The Animal Sanctuary of St. Croix Valley, Inc. at P.O. Box 847, Stillwater, MN 55082, 1-800-252-5918.

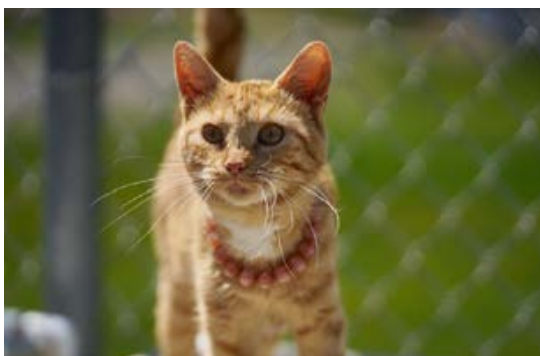
Kitten Shower

We realized Gertie represented a new population who needed to be seen with fresh eyes; cats and kittens who might be living outside but were too vulnerable and at risk to be left there, mischaracterized as feral simply because of where they had been found.

Gertie's story has a happy ending. But there are many felines, found just like her, who are struggling outdoors. Sadly, a huge number of these are kittens!

Kittens are always lovable, sought after and appealing so it was shocking how many have needed our help, and more surprising the severity of their circumstances, and the condition in which they were found. **Without immediate intervention they had no possibility of survival.** As a sanctuary, we would not expect to serve kittens, but we recognized they would never have a chance for a loving home without our swift assistance.

Butternut, only 10-12 weeks old, was found lying in a farm field, unable to move. She had been run over by a tractor and suffered a broken pelvis. With Home for Life's® help, she found a chance for safety and healing. As a leukemia positive kitten, she has joined Gertie in our cattery devoted to HFL's positive cats!



The photo of Butternut by Mark Luinenburg that inspired her watercolor portrait



Phoenix was found by a man visiting Minneapolis from California. Matthew emailed: "I found her on the side of the expressway leading into Minneapolis in the rain last week. She was next to another kitten that was dead, probably her littermate, hit by a car. Both kittens were very malnourished and the one still alive couldn't really stand." Home For Life® paid for Phoenix's medical care, where the surgeon found she had a broken femur and pelvis, and organized a foster home where she could safely heal from her injury and trauma.



Birdie was found on a golf course by one of its employees. The manager contacted us for help and sent us this photo (at right). "It is blackish/ greyish. We have nothing to feed her but these hot dogs. She is very hungry; I have attached a photo for you. I do not want this thing!" Home For Life® arranged medical screening and found a foster home for the kitten. Birdie has now been adopted to a loving home.



The abandoned litter of tiny kittens did not stand a chance without intervention. They were only 3 weeks old, not weaned and riddled with botflies, eaten alive by the larvae! Our vet removed the disgusting parasites, and our foster volunteer handfed the weakest until they were strong enough to eat on their own. It's horrifying to imagine their fate had they not received swift help from Home for Life.®



The Invisible Animals

You may be as shocked as we were to learn how many tame, but lost or unwanted, cats and kittens are left outside to sink or swim. Every adult cat we have helped was clearly once a pet, not feral, and had no idea how to survive outside, especially in our harsh Midwest climate. Like the fragile kittens, these adults, many seniors, often starving, were condemned to a slow death through exposure, disease and starvation without immediate assistance. In each situation, the cats were tame, desperate for human interaction, even

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neutered and spayed. But each cat had somehow slipped through the gaps in the system. The people concerned who contacted us said they had been turned down everywhere they called. The cats were categorized as feral, outdoor cats, while they were, in truth, former pets who were currently homeless and living outdoors.



Left: A homeowner found Willow struggling in the cold outside on her stoop. Due to allergic family members, she could not take her in. Home for Life® provided food, a foster home, and vet care for Willow who was found to have cancer.



Right: Nova, emaciated but finally indoors after over four months outside on her own.



Nova, an older cat, was abandoned outside her apartment when her owners moved. She had always been a pet, and had no idea of how to survive on her own, even with the food other building tenants left for her. They finally called Home for Life® to help Nova as the weather became colder, knowing she would never survive outside even if provided food. She was painfully thin and exhausted. Our veterinarian treated her with warm fluids and nutritious food, and she has recovered, narrowly avoiding a harsh and cruel end.

Nova, at Home for Life,® in her first portrait by photographer Mark Luinenburg

Home for Life® is a sanctuary. At the same time, our mission is to provide an alternative way forward for animals who fail to find help via the standard channels. This is what we call “The Third Door.” Could we provide a Third Door opportunity for these cats and kittens? **Most of them didn’t need lifelong sanctuary, only a period of grace and a lifeline to help them on their way. We believed that we could and must help them—that not turning away was consistent with our Third Door Mission.**

Gertie, Willow, Nova, and all the hungry, sick, and injured kittens struggling to survive amongst us...None were feral and not accustomed to living wild outdoors. These cats and kittens could not have survived another 48 hours without immediate help.

CATalyst: Mission Critical

Home for Life’s® focus on overlooked individuals has enabled us to spot gaps in the animal welfare system where cats or dogs are underserved and vulnerable, to identify where change needs to happen, and where there is opportunity for widespread improvement. No other group of animals we help at Home for Life® represents this focus of our organization more than these cats and kittens struggling alone outside.

As we continued to receive calls from the public about distressed cats and kittens, we recognized a critical need that was going unmet and an opportunity to network and collaborate to save lives. We were determined not to forsake these cats and kittens, including those that did not need sanctuary, but who would die without urgent assistance. In the spring of 2025, Home for Life® partnered with a Minneapolis cat rescue focused on adoption that could place many of the animals we had taken in, cared for and rehabilitated through our small network of foster homes which we had recruited. This partnership



has allowed us to continue to focus on our main mission of lifelong sanctuary while extending our impact. **Since Spring 2025, when we decided to take action, nearly 175 cats and kittens have benefitted with medical care, spay and neutering, fostering, and adoption through this collaboration, saving many lives!**

Adoption fees from kittens and cats adopted through our partnership are directed to the cat rescue with whom we work, to support their mission, creating a win-win for all!

CATalyst for Change

We have recognized through helping these cats and kittens that, sanctuary, **the Third Door® in animal welfare is not a template or silo but a perspective.** Helping the individual doesn't seem scalable but modeling compassion and then supporting that compassion IS scalable.

Members of the public form the frontline in the effort to improve the lives of cats and dogs in our community. As animal welfare representatives, we want to model the compassion we hope the public will emulate and that means doing all we can to embolden their empathy and support their agency, to give them an avenue to assist animals in need. Most members of the public will gladly provide food and water for an animal in distress, but they will often be eager to do much more with guidance and support.

By serving individual animals and not turning away from these desperate cats and kittens when we have been asked to assist, we have been able to exert widespread influence on the direction of animal welfare practice. And by modeling and supporting caring behavior among people who reach out to help, we create a movement of agency and responsiveness.



Underlying “the Third Door” in animal welfare is creativity and innovation, and a life affirming perspective. All that we accomplish starts with that perspective that led to the founding of Home for Life® more than 25 years ago: Animals who need us are not a problem to be solved but an untapped treasure. We believe in the significance of every life we care for, and that the life of each cat and dog counts.

That conviction is transformative, a premise that creates miracles—from establishing and taking new ground for the most vulnerable animals, to creating a safer world for all cats, kittens, pups and dogs by showing what’s possible.

Asking the right questions, helping the one in front of us, doing the next right thing, is the North star that guides us, so the animals most in need are not forsaken. Home for Life® is an agile and responsive organization that can pivot when animals require concrete assistance, while staying within our core mission of our sanctuary.

The lifesaving success of this nimble and responsive initiative over the past year is proof that these qualities that are the foundation of Home for Life® are effective.



***Right: Darlene was found outside this winter (pregnant) in a Twin Cities suburb.
Left: Darlene and her kittens this spring, soon to find safe and loving homes.***



Left: Charlie was abandoned last March in western Wisconsin and was being stalked by a bobcat when he was rescued. He was severely matted after being on his own for many weeks and had to be shaved.

Right: Charlie—adopted, healthy and safe in his new home!

Home for Life[®] was established to find an answer for animals who fail to find or keep homes. The plight of these cats and kittens being left outside to face a harsh fate has continued to confound the animal welfare world charged with helping them. Home for Life[®] has an innovative solution to help these special cats, kittens, puppies and dogs—an idea that we call “the Third Door.” The third door has meant care-for-life sanctuary, where their hearts and health can heal but the third door is also a perspective: extending animals in need the benefit of doubt and grace, thinking outside the box to discover lifesaving solutions. And making sure kittens and cats who may not ultimately belong in a sanctuary—or outside—will still have a chance to live and have a loving home for life.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Miss Jo Verdine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Executive Director

