

“I was helping animals because suffering is suffering, and doing what you can to ease it in any living being is part of my approach to life.”

— Sharon Methvin, Clark College professor who rescued animals in the South after Hurricane Katrina had struck



Courtesy of SHARON METHVIN

# Rescue mission



MIKE SALSBUry/The Columbian

**Clark College professor Sharon Methvin strokes Blackie, one of four cats she brought back from New Orleans. Methvin is seeking good homes for the felines, whose lives were upended by Katrina.**

Clark College

professor

spends

break aiding

hurricane's

animal victims

By TRICIA JONES  
*Columbian staff writer*

**F**or Christmas, Sharon Methvin got Eve. And just in time. The days leading up to Dec. 24 had been frustrating for Methvin, a professor of sociology and anthropology at Clark College. She'd spent more than two weeks in New Orleans feeding and attempting to save animals left homeless, hungry and thirsty by Hurricane Katrina.

Former neighborhoods looked like battle zones. Traumatized cats dodged humans trying to help them. Just days before, Methvin had witnessed the death of a dog rescued too late.

But then there was Eve.

Methvin heard word of a black, long-haired cat staking out one of the wrecked houses and went to investigate.

"I heard the 'meow,' the sweetest sound I have heard since arriving, and one that I so often strain to hear in the houses and streets," Methvin wrote in her New Orleans journal. "She hopped up out of an abandoned car in the driveway and came to eat two cans of food. ...

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- How to adopt cats brought to the Northwest from Louisiana and Mississippi.
- Vancouver veterinarian volunteered in September for eight days.

She is likely someone's cherished and pampered pet."

The friendly feline accepted a ride back to an intake station with Methvin. Eve turned out to be a neutered male now called Evan. If his former owners cannot be found, Evan will live with another rescue volunteer who's offered him a new home.

Methvin and other volunteers in and around New Orleans savored happy endings such as Eve/Evan's. Animals that managed to survive the Aug. 29 hurricane are still dying, foraging and breeding among the ruins of houses that once sheltered many of them. Methvin brought back four cats for which she is seeking new homes. Still on her mind are the many animals she couldn't bring to safety.

## Watching and waiting

**"The days after Christmas, I worked in the Ninth Ward. Cats seemed to be the only thing that survived here. No one is going to come back. The**

## Did you know?

- Five U.S. Congressmen have sponsored legislation that would require local and state officials seeking grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to submit plans outlining how they would accommodate household pets and service animals in case of disaster.

# Rescue:

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**few animals that survived ... wait inside doorsteps and the holes of destroyed homes ... only they know what they are thinking."**

*—From Sharon Methvin's journal, Dec. 27*

Before her Dec. 8 departure from Portland International Airport, Methvin admitted to mixed feelings about the trip to Louisiana.

"Part of me feels a little bit afraid of what I'm going to see that maybe I can't do anything about," Methvin said in November. "The other part feels, if I don't do something, I'll feel worse than being afraid (would feel)."

Like many Americans, Methvin was aghast at the destruction of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Giving money didn't seem to be enough for her. She realized her upcoming winter break at Clark College could be an opportunity to do more.

Methvin, 53, said she also was compelled to put into practice the messages she delivers at Clark: Do something. Make a difference. Get involved.

"I feel I have a responsibility to students to model what I teach in the classroom," said Methvin, who generally has 175 to 200 students each school term.

Animal rescue work was the natural choice. Methvin already shared her Tigard, Ore., home with five cats taken from abusive or otherwise adverse environments. She also had volunteer experience with the Feral Cat Coalition of Oregon. The nonprofit group spays and neuters feral, stray and barn cats fed by caregivers in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

Methvin hooked up with Alley Cat Allies, one of several animal rescue groups pooling efforts in the areas hardest hit by Katrina. She spent her first several days in Louisiana assisting a veterinarian preparing rescued cats for departure to homes and shelters across the country. Methvin also helped move so-called "hard-to-handle" cats from temporary shelters to recreational vehicles. These were bound for organizations ready to arrange adoptions or place the cats in sanctuaries.

As Alley Cat Allies, which sets up feeding stations for feral cat

colonies, scaled back rescue efforts in New Orleans, Methvin joined with Best Friends Animal Society and local grass-roots volunteers to get as many animals as possible out of harm's way.

Many dogs and cats were left behind by owners who thought they'd be returning soon, Methvin said. Some people were ordered by rescue teams to abandon their pets.

Methvin heard about one elderly woman in an attic who had prepared her pets for evacuation by placing them in their carriers.

"(Rescuers) took her out of a hole in her attic and left the animals," Methvin said. "She thought they were coming with her. ... they died from heat and starvation in their carriers."

Jane Garrison, a founder of Animal Rescue New Orleans, said members of the grass-roots group estimate that 200,000 animals have died in the aftermath of Katrina. Tens of thousands are still roaming amongst the wreckage; perhaps 10 percent have been relocated or reunited with their owners, Garrison said.

Methvin spent some of her time doing mundane chores such as laundry and cleaning kennels. More often, she brought food and water to places frequented

by roaming animals and checked for signs of life in silent, ravaged neighborhoods.

## All that remains

**"The Ninth Ward has an eerie feeling about it. Completely quiet, no birds, squirrels, and no people ... everything (had a) gray coating of muck. The most touching moment was when I was pulling a piece of wood to set up a feeding station and realized I had picked up the drawer of someone's jewelry box, and, as I looked closer, I saw all her jewelry — some still in the box — just lying there in the yard."**

—*Journal entry, Dec. 16*

As she searched through debris, Methvin said she tried to be respectful of people's possessions and privacy. Residents had begun to return to the area to reclaim belongings or just say goodbye in their own ways. Some needed to talk about their experiences; others clearly wanted to be left alone.

One woman shook Methvin's hand and thanked her for being there. A man whose own dogs had drowned in his garage was feeding homeless canines. He couldn't save his pets, but hoped to see others safely removed

from the streets

"The anthropologist in me enjoyed the opportunity to be in the field, talking with these people about their experiences," Methvin said.

The human in Methvin, however, had to steel herself to be calm and efficient despite heart-stabbing situations.

## A quiet ending

**"My first actual field rescue was last week. The military came by ... to tell us about a dog living under a fallen tree and pile of debris. Two of us managed to get her out and to the vet clinic. Unfortunately, she was in the later stages of heartworm disease. She had a great night later at my sleeping station, sitting on the porch watching people and the stars, safe and warm. I held her as she had a peaceful death the next morning."**

—*Journal entry, Dec. 24.*

Methvin said she left for Louisiana knowing that she couldn't be worn down by the enormity of the suffering she'd see. Her encounter with the terminally ill dog put that resolve to the test.

"To keep myself healthy, I needed to frame things in a way that minimized the amount of

psychological distress, but also looked for the good in things," she said. "(The dog's euthanasia) was so much better than her not being found, and dying an agonizing death."

Another tonic for Methvin was bringing home the four cats she'd like to place with local homes. Blackie, Bam-Bam, Peanut and Noel are all spayed females. All are solid black except for Noel, a gray tortoiseshell. All except Blackie are extremely shy and will need understanding human companions. One cat, Bam-Bam, probably has a feline virus similar to HIV that is not transmissible to humans but that will require special considerations.

These four, like many animals that lived through Katrina, will need extra kindness for a couple of months to realize they are safe, Methvin said.

The concept of sanctuary seems distant to the cats that flew back from Louisiana with Methvin. When approached by visitors, Methvin's lodgers hunker under furniture in the room she set aside for them.

Methvin is aware not everyone would applaud her actions. Some question the necessity of traveling so far when time and money could be spent on needs within the immediate area. Others would ask why such resources are spent on animals rather than people. And Methvin agrees these are considerations worthy of public discussion.

"I was helping animals, because suffering is suffering, and doing what you can to ease it in any living being is part of my approach to life," Methvin said. "So many people are desperately hoping their animals might still be alive ... and helping can make each of us feel like we're part of the (larger) community."

**"Waiting for (the cats to be unloaded from the plane) cargo was the first time I really lost it and burst into tears in the airport bathroom. ... Was the time worth it over winter break? As they were unloaded and safe, I knew the answer was: You bet ya. When I look into the eyes of these four cats, now warm and safe, who before were hopelessly wandering the deserted streets and gutted houses, the trip, time and skill has made a difference. And that difference is being collectively multiplied every day by other volunteers. ... A very happy meow year to all."**

— *Journal entry, Dec. 31.*

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Former pets left homeless by Hurricane Katrina are adjusting to new surroundings all over the country, including the Pacific Northwest.

Others, such as the felines brought back from Louisiana by Clark College professor Sharon Methvin, are still awaiting adoption. That's also true of about 10 transported cats now in care at the Cat Adoption Team of Sherwood, Ore.

Board member Britta Bavaresco said the no-kill cat shelter can connect potential adopters with Methvin and also is matching up people with other cat evacuees. The shelter, which has its own veterinary hospital, completed 2,500 adoptions last year, Bavaresco said.

The Cat Adoption Team in October chartered a private plane to rescue 41 cats from areas affected by Katrina. Bavaresco said that far from taking potential homes from other ownerless cats in the area, the influx of Katrina cats prompted Northwesterners to open their homes to all cats in need.

"We were able through donations to add more capacity (to the shelter), and because of that, we are able to rescue even more animals from Oregon," she said.

People willing to open their homes to such a cat may call 503-925-8903. Bavaresco said people interested specifically in the cats now staying with Methvin should indicate as much so they can be connected directly with her. For more information about the Sherwood shelter, visit [www.catadoptionteam.org](http://www.catadoptionteam.org).

The national group Best Friends Animal Society has a Web site for people who would like to adopt a pet left behind by people fleeing Katrina. Visit [www.bestfriends.org/HF/AD.cfm](http://www.bestfriends.org/HF/AD.cfm).

For those who have time to donate, Animal Rescue New Orleans is accepting volunteers to help out in the city through the end of February. People are needed to feed, trap, and help prepare animals for transport to safer locations. Donations also are still being accepted for dog and cat food

and other supplies. For information, visit [www.animalrescueneworleans.com](http://www.animalrescueneworleans.com) or call 800-728-3273 (the number equals the first seven letters of Save a Pet).

In addition, the Humane Society for Southwest Washington continues to accept donations to be sent to animal rescue groups in Louisiana and Mississippi. As of Jan. 9, the Humane Society for Southwest Washington had collected \$8,408 donated by Clark County residents for hurricane relief. Society spokeswoman Sara Detmering said the money was sent to the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and to two groups both called the Humane Society of Mississippi. The Vancouver shelter sent an additional \$1,000 to help care for the animals. Detmering said donors need to write "Katrina" or "Hurricane Relief" directly onto the check, or add a note when sending cash. Otherwise money received will go into the society's general fund, she said. Call 360-750-0847.

—Tricia Jones