

## RESCUE PROFILE: *Sister Kitten Animal Rescue*

During his first year of college, Eric Phelps began learning about animal rights and animal welfare issues—and he never looked back. At that moment, he knew his future would involve animal advocacy and rescue.

Growing up in a multi-animal household he had a love of animals even as a child. An early introduction to the plight of animals came in an article he read about how, in Asia, dogs are raised for food. He began to compare this practice with the U.S. food supply—which includes cows, pigs, chickens and other animals. Realizing there was no difference in the species in terms of the value of their life, he made the decision to become a vegetarian and started to speak out on the plight of animals used for food, in laboratories and for fur. In 1996, he volunteered for PETA and was later hired in a communications capacity.

Flash forward 30 years. In 2019, with several decades of experience working throughout the country in animal advocacy, welfare and rescue, Eric started Sister Kitten Animal Rescue (SKAR), a non-profit 501(c)3 organization. Sister Kitten's mission is to improve animal lives and the public's perceptions of animals, with a focus on supporting community cats and outdoor dogs.

Based in Maggie Valley, NC, Sister Kitten is active in nine counties across WNC, most heavily in Buncombe and Henderson. Sister Kitten's programs include rescuing and re-homing abandoned and neglected animals, TNR (Trap, Neuter, Return) and providing veterinary care for rescued sick animals. In addition, SKAR provides support, education and assistance to caregivers of community cats and promotes community animal welfare—both critical components of their mission.

With the support of the community, Sister Kitten has very active foster and adoption programs for rescued kittens, as well as for animals that need new homes, regardless of the reason. Sister Kitten is a Petco Adoption Partner and maintains kittens for adoption at the Petco store, 385 Brevard Rd. in Asheville.

According to Phelps, in 2020, the first full year of operation, Sister Kitten had logged many important accomplishments with the help of their supporters:

- Spayed/neutered over 600 animals
- Assisted over 150 caregivers in nine counties in WNC and driven over 30,000 miles
- Fostered/adopted 130 animals
- Provided more than 35,000 meals to community cats

"Perhaps most importantly, we've saved dozens of kittens from lives on the streets," Phelps stated.

Sister Kitten also works closely with county animal shelters, the ASPCA Spay/Neuter Alliance and area veterinarians.

### **Working with County Animal Shelters**

When asked how they work with County Animal Shelters, Phelps replied, "We pull animals in need of special attention and at risk of euthanasia. For example, a shelter supervisor recently contacted me regarding two kittens with ringworm. The shelter had no means of isolating the kittens so that they could be treated there. I contacted our foster home families and found a home where they could be treated and then be ready for adoption."

He continued, "In one case, a new cat showed up in a feral cat colony that had clearly been an indoor cat. We took him to the county shelter where it turned out she had a microchip identifying the owners, and the cat had even been adopted from that shelter. In another situation, we were contacted by a family whose elderly relative could no longer take care of herself and her five cats. The cats

were left behind and needed to be rescued. Together with animal control, we assisted in trapping and removing the cats from the property. We promised the family that we would take on the responsibility of re-homing the cats."

Phelps has also had experiences with dogs and wildlife. Here he describes a couple of times that either SKAR or he personally, was able to offer aide. "We are often called upon to investigate situations where 'outdoor dogs' are being kept in substandard conditions. These are frequently dogs that, although they have an owner, live completely outdoors, perhaps with minimal shelter and maybe minimal food and water. A good example last year was the case of Sugar Ray. Upon investigation, we found that this dog had lived outdoors, at the end of a chain, for 14 years! He was badly in need of medical care. After a somewhat lengthy negotiation with the owner, we were able to take the dog into custody, provide the care needed to bring him back to full health and find a loving forever home."

### **Rescue is Not Just Cats & Dogs**

"It turns out, my animal rescue work is not just about feral cats and outdoor dogs," said Phelps. "In a recent two-month period, I rescued a squirrel on the road that had been clipped by a car, getting her to Edith Allen Wildlife Sanctuary in Canton where she was brought back to health; rescued a domesticated rabbit found hopping along I-26 who was adopted and is now in a forever home; and rescued two different dogs on the loose. One had escaped after a serious car accident and was found wandering in traffic in danger of being run over. The other was running on New Leicester Highway. Both dogs were returned to their grateful owners with the help of their identification tags."

He continued, "Although many people could have aided these animals most people don't know how and just drive by. But recently I encountered a possum on the top of a chain-link fence that couldn't get down. Not having had much experience helping possums, I tried a net, to no avail. A local man stopped by, grabbed the possum by the neck and set it on the ground. Animal rescue isn't just found in formal organizations."

Sister Kitten has also participated in rescues in other states due to weather-related disasters such as tornadoes or hurricanes. Phelps acknowledges how demanding and dangerous the work can be, but feels more hands can save more animals. "The satisfaction of saving helpless animals in dire conditions more than compensates for the difficult working conditions. I've been involved in rapid response rescue during hurricanes and other weather-related disasters in LA, TX, MS and FL."

Sister Kitten's priorities in 2021 and beyond include increasing their foster home and adoption base to help more kittens have happy lives off the street. They also intend to become more involved in rapid response rescue work.

### **How Animal Lovers Can Help SKAR**

Sister Kitten Animal Rescue depends on volunteers and donations of money and supplies for the animals' food and treatment needs. "All rescued animals need medical care, whether it is spay/neuter, vaccinations, medications or more extensive treatment," he said. "This work is expensive and cannot be done without generous support from animal lovers since we receive no government funding."

"So, although we love our work, it takes contributions from everyone who is concerned about animals to make it happen. We count on their donations," stated Phelps.

New volunteers and donors can reach out to SKAR via Facebook ([facebook.com/sisterkitten](https://facebook.com/sisterkitten)); Sister Kitten's website ([sisterkitten.org](https://sisterkitten.org)) has adoption applications and donation links; and for Individuals & organizations who wish to donate to support Sister Kitten's efforts can do so at [sisterkitten.org/how-to-help](https://sisterkitten.org/how-to-help).