Uniting for Important Paws: The Independent Cat Society and S.H.I.N.E.

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INTRODUCTION

Anatole France said that “until one has loved an animal, a part of one’s soul remains unawakened” (France, 2019). Animal shelters around the world work to promote this message and place companion animals in loving homes. Though approximately 6.3 million animals still enter shelters nationwide every year in the United States, there are many animal care organizations like the Independent Cat Society (ICS) that have contributed largely to positive changes in animal welfare, as these statistics show a significant decline in homeless animals since 2011 (ASPCA, 2019). Of the 6.3 million animals referenced, approximately 3.2 million are cats; when compared to homeless dogs, felines have not seen as significant a decline in homelessness, making the work of animal shelters like the ICS crucial for the community and demonstrating that there is still much work to be done regarding the larger issue of animal homelessness (ASPCA, 2019).

While growing up, I learned about the importance of caring for animals when my family began rescuing stray cats. I loved reading books about felines, such as Vicki Myron’s *Dewey: The Small-Town Library Cat Who Touched the World* (Myron & Witter, 2008), which depicted the impact of cat rescues on people and communities. This book inspired me to start writing about my experiences with our rescues; collectively, this helped me realize my love of writing, nature, and animals, and greatly shaped my focus in college. While earning my bachelor’s degree in English writing, I wrote many grants for community organizations working for positive change, and through Purdue University Northwest (PNW) mentors such as Dr. Anastasia Trekles, I learned about the ICS and its work as a nonprofit, cageless, no-kill cat shelter minutes from PNW’s Westville campus.

Not long after that I started volunteering with and writing grants for the ICS. The curriculum I worked through for my English degree and certificate in Writing for New Media well prepared me for this grant-writing experience. This knowledge, combined with my experiences working for other organizations like S.H.I.N.E (Students Helping Ignite Needed Esteem), in addition to my love of animals, made this a dream project for me.

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Kayla Vasilko has just finished the first year of her master’s program in communication studies. She has rescued over 55 cats with her family and loves animals. She places her love of the outside world at the center of all her work; in addition to grant writing for community organizations, Kayla is currently working with the PNW Graduate Association of Leaders on what she and her team call the “Precious Plastics Project,” which, when completed, will help reduce plastic waste in northwest Indiana and surrounding communities. She is also working to continue to spark environmental change by bringing art to PNW’s Westville campus that tells the story of Indiana’s “Hoosier Slide.”
Starting this collaboration allowed me to strengthen my skills in writing and community engagement while making a positive difference in the world. The primary objectives of this project were to help the Independent Cat Society successfully continue its operations, navigate challenges brought on by COVID-19, and help connect two student organizations to the ICS as a community partner.

UNITING FOR IMPORTANT PAWS

DESCRIPTION

The Independent Cat Society has been an integral part of the community since 1977 with a mission of serving “as many cats, pet owners, and community members in the northwest Indiana and neighboring Chicago and southwest Michigan area as possible” (ICS, 2019). The ICS was founded after several cat lovers in Beverly Shores, Indiana, met in 1976 to discuss the need for a no-kill cat shelter in their area. Based on what they had seen in other shelters, more attention was paid to the adoption of dogs. Additionally, cats were repeatedly being abandoned in the beach community of Beverly Shores. The founders wanted to create an organization dedicated to rescuing abandoned and abused cats and giving them the best affordable medical care (Gerometta, 2007). The founders wanted to ensure that the shelter was a sanctuary, and that if cat adopters could no longer care for a cat, it could be returned to the shelter.

Volunteer membership in the ICS grew rapidly. The shelter started in several foster homes, grew into a barn, then a motel, then a factory building, survived a fire, and eventually moved into a property in Westville that the ICS could grow into. Every step of the process required extraordinary dedication from the founding volunteers (Gerometta, 2007).

To put their work into a larger context, the ICS participates in Shelter Animals Count, a national database that enables progress to be measured in animal welfare and aims to inspire life-saving collaboration. The ICS feels joining in is very important, as it allows the ICS, northwest Indiana, and the rest of the world to understand how
we’re doing with adoptions and cat overpopulation. The numbers beyond our own are certainly informative. Statistics from Shelter Animals Count are becoming increasingly important indicators of the effectiveness and impact of shelter spay and neuter and adoption programs. This data is also important for shelter grant applications (Jocius, 2022; Shelter Animals Count, 2022).

Guenther’s (2020) *The Lives and Deaths of Shelter Animals* illustrates the complexities and challenges associated with positive progress for animal welfare. Even more complex is the specific conversation of no-kill shelters vs. kill shelters, but the ICS has based its operations largely around their views that no-kill shelters are important for both animals (they have rights as living, breathing, feeling spirits who share our world) and people (a community that values an animal’s life and well-being is a kinder and more humane place to live, work, and create) (Jocius, 2022). The ICS has learned a lot from Nathan Winograd, national director of the No Kill Law and Advocacy Center, who spoke in 2008 in northwest Indiana. His organization has assisted communities in shifting shelter animal kill rates of 99% to rescuing, placing, and adopting over 90% of sheltered animals. Shelter Animals Count considers 90% to be the benchmark for no-kill (Jocius, 2022).

In line with this, the ICS has sponsored Dr. Linda Harper, author of *The Power of Joy in Giving to Animals*, to present workshops for the community at PNW on pet bereavement and animal welfare. Dr. Harper has also tied her work into the impact of no-kill shelters on the community, citing the Tao Te Ching: “compassionate toward yourself, you reconcile all beings in the world” (Jocius, 2022).

Above all, the ICS strives to create a sanctuary space for homeless cats. Felines roam throughout the shelter and have designated rooms that lead to what the ICS calls “the runs,” a string of connected screened-in rooms that give the cats a place to enjoy the sounds of nature, watch birds and other wildlife, and sniff the fresh air. The ICS admits all types of cats in the shelter, including those who are recovering from injuries, need special medical attention, or are expecting kittens. The ICS foster care volunteers primarily care for the cats that need frequent attention and a quiet place to recuperate (ICS, 2019).

Customarily, the ICS holds numerous events throughout the year to raise funds, welcome new supporters, and work with members. The ICS strives to give back to community volunteers and supporters as much as they can through these fun events, making sure to let the community know that the events aren’t just a way to support the organization, but are also an opportunity to build relationships and have wonderful experiences (ICS, 2019). They include prizes and crafts in signature events such as the annual Cat’s Meow gala, spring and fall yard sales, holiday open houses, sweetheart contests, chili cookoffs, and more.

The ICS addresses feline overpopulation through trap, neuter, release (TNR) programs, and educates the public on responsible animal care and feline ownership practices through additional programs put on by the organization. The ICS unwaveringly provides health care for the needs of the entire shelter population (ICS, 2019).

The ICS is governed by a nine-member board of directors; each member holds a two-year volunteer position and plays a role in allocating resources, planning fundraiser and adoption events, and making all decisions involved in the well-being and continued operation of the shelter. Board members also oversee and guide a team of over 100 ICS volunteers. ICS volunteers contributed more than 13,600 hours of their time and talents in just 2020 alone; volunteers help run events, market for the shelter, and even “sponsor” cats (ICS, 2019). Cat sponsors can choose a specific cat to sponsor after visiting the shelter, or have an ICS member choose for them. Sponsors donate monthly gifts for their cat(s) and enjoy visiting them and bringing toys and treats throughout the year. This and the “Room Parent” program—a volunteer gets to sponsor a cat room by decorating it, bringing in toys, and socializing the cats—are especially wonderful opportunities for individuals or groups who can’t have pets at home (ICS, 2019).

The ICS also hosts college interns and regularly partners with students and faculty from Purdue University Northwest, which allows students and the community to learn more about the ICS and its work. It also improves ICS operations through a two-way flow of knowledge, as the ICS is able to train more community members on effective and responsible feline care and the importance of this cause, and also learns additional tools for outreach and public relations (ICS, 2019). With its educational programs, fundraising initiatives further connecting the community, foster and room parent opportunities, and unique cageless structure, coupled with methods aiming to reimagine work for animal welfare, the ICS’s work is highly comparable to the Human Animal Support Services (HASS) model, a prominent animal welfare movement made possible by partners like the Rachael Ray Foundation, PetSmart Charities, and Petfinder (HASS, 2022).
The bulk of the work for the project highlighted here spanned two semesters, though it is important to highlight that it is still ongoing due to the new partnerships that were formed. I am the founder of two PNW student organizations: S.H.I.N.E (Students Helping Ignite Needed Esteem), an organization that strives to make a positive difference and improve mental health through kind acts, and A.M.F (Actively Moving Forward), an organization that helps bereaved individuals heal. The volunteer roles the ICS offers aligns perfectly with S.H.I.N.E’s mission, and research has demonstrated that the opportunity to socialize and care for cats has been shown to help improve mental health, satisfying the mission of both organizations. Thus, I reached out to the ICS to connect the organizations and see how we could help.

At this time, the ICS had been in the middle of two major projects, in addition to the work involved with normal operations: cleaning up the outdoor grounds and helping modify the main areas of the shelter, all as part of their “catification” renovation plan. To help with this, I wrote and earned two Purdue service-learning grants. With these grants, S.H.I.N.E and A.M.F were able to redecorate the ICS kitten nursery and main areas by purchasing new cat beds, shelves, and cat towers. We also helped clean up the ICS grounds, outdoor run areas, and ICS shop with new garden and cleaning supplies, as well as new screen doors. Though these projects involved substantial work, being able to be at the shelter was a joy, and very calming. S.H.I.N.E and A.M.F plan to continue to work at the ICS for much time to come, as there is still a lot of work to be done inside the shelter and on the grounds; the organizations are very glad to be able to continue to help.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Since the ICS is a nonprofit organization, it relies on fundraising and donations to keep the shelter operational. Though it is run by volunteers, it still takes considerable funding to supply the cat food, medicine, and additional supplies needed to maintain the shelter. Due to COVID-19, the ICS was unable to put on many of its staple fundraising events, and it has also been creatively navigating how to safely work with volunteers during this time. Thus, being able to earn these grants and do additional volunteer work with the ICS was immensely important. S.H.I.N.E and A.M.F were able to do much remotely while working to understand the ICS’s needs and putting together the grant applications, then practiced social distancing and adhered to COVID guidelines when doing the work in the shelter. Working with the ICS Building

With the wide range of volunteer roles described, there are endless opportunities for student engagement at the Independent Cat Society. These opportunities are available to students on a regular basis, as they are all rooted in the day-to-day operations of the shelter. Many projects have been facilitated by students reaching out to the shelter themselves. Before my work with this community partner, I worked as an intern with ICS grant writer Roberta Jocius. The collaboration was inspired by an assignment for my Honors College Capstone course; after reading the assignment requirements, I knew instantly that I wanted to work with the ICS. This internship preceded extensive volunteer experiences I had with the shelter, and preceded my future volunteer grant writing and volunteer work.
Committee and other ICS board members and volunteers was a great success, as the work we did has helped the ICS continue to accommodate the increase in rescues and allow for better cat care.

Despite challenges brought on by the pandemic (such as not being able to host the same types of fundraisers and restructuring shelter care to adhere to new guidelines), because student and community volunteers came together, often working overtime due to short-staffing, the ICS made every effort possible to serve its population. In 2020, 351 cats were spayed and neutered, and 299 were adopted into loving homes. The ICS also maintained successful TNR efforts and continued to offer assistance to community members who needed veterinary expenses for their pets.

As shown by the graphic, the ICS calculates life-saving percentages yearly by dividing adoptions by the number of cats not yet adopted or who passed away. The year 2020 was the ICS’s most successful year yet.

The ICS was well prepared to work with S.H.I.N.E and A.M.F volunteers given that it was built on volunteer work. Even after current officers of both organizations graduate, the ICS’s partnerships with A.M.F and S.H.I.N.E will be sustained, as both organizations have new members joining each month. I plan to volunteer with the ICS long after graduation.

**AUTHOR IMPACT**

Working creatively during the pandemic has helped me think outside the box about community engagement. Throughout this project, I was calling on my skills in writing and organization management while also strengthening and expanding them. While helping clean the ICS runs, budgeting for the grant, socializing with the cats, and at every step of the project, I learned how hard every ICS member works to ensure this organization is here for the community. I feel that this experience has helped prepare me for my future work, as I plan to continue focusing on engagement and would like to expand my outreach globally.

The ICS’s Rainbow Bridge Garden impacted me the most, because it was built by one of the ICS volunteers I most looked up to. It’s a place dedicated to honoring the cats that have been lost; the bricks throughout the garden are engraved with the names of those being remembered, and a variety of plants thrive around the path, bridge, and arch. The garden was built in part by Vietnam veteran Bill Foster who, sadly, recently passed.
ICS is and always has been a no-kill, privately run shelter.

**Timeline**

This dashboard displays data for organizations that turned in full data sets for the selected year. Organizations that turned in partial data for the year are excluded. Updated 5/23/21, with data through February 2021.

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**Figure 8.** The ICS Life-Saving Chart (catsociety.org).

**Figure 9.** The ICS Rainbow Bridge Garden Bill Foster dedication.
away. Volunteers have come together to continue to maintain the garden, and it was a big part of this project. I believe that the garden represents everything that is extraordinary about engagement: unity, community, and beautiful, positive results. I had the honor of getting to know Bill when I first started volunteering with the ICS, and he was an incredible mentor. No matter what the task, he was always willing to help or try to solve the problem, and he was extremely kind. He started volunteering at the ICS shortly after his wife, Diana Foster, did. Diana was wonderfully supportive of me from my very first time helping at the shelter, and over the years, hers has become one of my most treasured friendships. Through her guidance and support and the inspiration of Bill, I started a project to preserve the stories of veterans. My relationship with the Fosters is an incredible example of what can come from service-learning.

Another special relationship I formed is with Fiona, the ICS’s feline office manager. Fiona was the first cat I met when I visited the ICS, and I wanted to know her story the moment she came up and greeted me. Fiona was found on a rainy night in 2016 wandering the side of the road. She was treated for mastitis and given her Scottish name because of her cropped ears, which reminded the ICS team of a Scottish fold cat (the ICS hopes her ears were cut because of frostbite, and not because her former humans liked the style). In addition to gracing the cover of the 2018 ICS calendar and being a prominent favorite in the 2017 Sweetheart Contest, Fiona welcomes all ICS visitors, inspects all boxes, and has first choice of the cat beds, trees, and toys that come in. She was the first cat to inspect and give her approval of the new Joan Hildebrand

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**Figure 10.** The ICS Rainbow Bridge Garden.

**Figure 11.** The ICS Rainbow Bridge remembrance bricks.
other volunteers or members of the population the organization serves, the service-learning work starts to mean even more, and suddenly you find yourself coming up with innovative ways to help the organization even further. I also challenge students to be creative and not give up, even when facing barriers to volunteer work like COVID-19. For this project, I thought the challenges were like seasons reflected in the Rainbow Bridge Garden: always cycling. It may have seemed dark, or cold, or even impossible and pointless at times, but even in the winter, there is still much work to be done in a garden. When care is taken, the result is a spring garden so beautiful it is imaginable only by the most creative and determined minds.

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