

Cats, kittens are Pen Pals for Pocahontas inmates

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Friday, October 7, 2005

Tuesday Kilgore's face reddened and her eyes began to tear.

The black and gray kittens she had nurtured were headed for new adoptive homes. But to Kilgore, a mother of six, , watching the departure of animals she helped raise was bittersweet.

"Since I'm away from my kids this [replaces] my motherly instinct," said Kilgore, 35.

"It's also a way to give back to Hurricane Katrina victims," she said. "We give [the cats] a second chance because we've been given a second chance."

Kilgore is one of a few female inmates at Pocahontas Correctional Unit No. 13 in Chesterfield County whose model behavior earned a special privilege. The women care for 42 cats and kittens living in a small building on prison property.

Several of the cats in the inmates' care were retrieved from area shelters by the Richmond-based Save Our Shelters, a nonprofit animal-rescue organization. The animals were placed at the prison as part of the Pen Pals program.

The program pairs rescued dogs and cats with inmates at state prisons who tend the animals until they are adopted, explained Cathy Leach, director of Pen Pals.

"The inmates are providing a service to the community and gain some self-redemption from their work," she said.

Pen Pals debuted at James River Correctional Center in Goochland County in 2001 and now the program operates in five Virginia prisons, state Department of Corrections spokesman Larry Traylor said.

More recently the Pen Pals program debuted at the Pocahontas Unit.

At first it was a modest program that covered a small number of cats. Then Hurricane Katrina hit, leaving cats from the Gulf Coast without homes, and in some cases, owners.

Knowing there was space at Pocahontas, Save Our Shelters cat coordinator Peggy Lynch worked with a network of other animal-rescue volunteers to get the cats delivered to the prison.

Pocahontas inmates say their work with cats is therapeutic.

"The thing I enjoy most is that I am able to care for and love these animals, especially the feral ones, and watch them become domesticated into kind and loving creatures after being so wild," said inmate Wendy Brickey.

Lisa Sclafani said she enjoys the sense of accomplishment she gets from helping cats left homeless by Katrina.

And Tuesday Kilgore, who is nearing the end of her sentence, said her interaction with the animals helps take her mind off incarceration and recover "my sense of peace and responsibility that I lost during my drug addiction."

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