

## A CHERRY HILL VOLUNTEER'S STORY

By Leigh Zelenski

I am a lifelong resident of Cherry Hill. My father was born/raised on Dobbs Farm - now Comcast off of Haddonfield-Berlin Road.

Growing up, I always had a love of animals. My family had chickens, rabbits, dogs, cats, birds, guinea pigs, hamsters, etc. I also was a groom for the standardbred horses at my cousins' farm, Stafford Farm on Springdale Road. Animals have always been a huge part of my life.

Six years ago, a retired friend got me involved in volunteering at the Voorhees Animal Orphanage. (I taught elementary school in Voorhees for 30 years.) I began volunteering by helping out with the shelter cats at the satellite locations (Petvalu, Petco, PetSmart). After retiring from teaching a couple of years ago, I really embraced volunteering at the shelter. I love the action at the shelter! I volunteer at least 15-20 hours a week at the shelter plus care for cats at the off-site locations.

Although I love all animals, I devote my time to the kitties. I assist potential adopters in finding the "just right" new family member. I give love/help socialize the cats, so I get to know the furbabies pretty well.

Volunteers at VAO fill in the gap for staff. Volunteers clean cages, set up new cages, change out dirty/wet laundry, clean litter boxes, feed the cats, help socialize frightened cats, and watch the cats for any behavioral/health changes. Volunteers alert the feline care manager of any health concerns or lack of socialization. I also train the new volunteers in a "safe-cat handling" class and give educational talks to children about the shelter.

Volunteering at VAO has incredible highs and some sad lows. It can sometimes be like riding a rollercoaster. One moment, an adopter walks in and says....Who is your longest resident?...Do you have

any special needs cats?...Who is your oldest cat? Some of our adopters are really angels on Earth. Just so kind and restore your faith in humanity.

The next moment though, a newly surrendered or maybe abandoned pair of cats will arrive afraid and traumatized. There's nothing sadder than seeing a newly surrendered kitty, confused and depressed, staring at the back of a cage. The shelter is not for the faint of heart.

Of course, wonderful adoptions are a volunteer's "paycheck." I do get attached to the cats. I try my best to work with the longer residents, so they are easier to handle and more adoptable. I can sense now, when a cat is "ready to fly" or to be adopted. I know that taking a cat home is a natural human response to so many homeless orphans, but it's impossible for one person to adopt them all.

I really stink at fostering too. I tend to keep my fosters. I am a "foster failure" multiple times over. I am currently at 8 kitties and a couple strays, so really there's no room at the inn for any more cats.

My advice for people thinking about volunteering is to try it. If it's not for you, there's no obligation. Plus, there are tons of ways to help out the animals without having to be at the shelter on a steady basis. Check out the Voorhees Animal Orphanage website for different ways you can help. I have to add too, that you'll meet some of the most wonderful people at VAO. The staff and volunteers are from all walks of life but carry the common thread of wanting to help animals.

Volunteering is not always easy, but I find it very rewarding. It truly is a "labor of love." I feel fortunate to be able to pursue both of my life's passions, helping children and animals.



## Community



Sue Petridge prepares the soil for planting.



Reinhard Zapfe explains the planting to some of the volunteers.

## IN THE POLLINATOR GARDEN

By Alice Riehl

On Earth Day, April 22, Cherry Hill citizens joined the Cherry Hill Environmental Board (CHEB) in planting new native plants in the 5 pollinator gardens established by CHEB in Cherry Hill Open Space land. Pollinator Garden Crew Volunteers, which included our own publisher, Frankie Patterson, sowed the plants that, as natives, support pollinators like bees, butterflies and birds.

The crew will help maintain the gardens throughout the growing season and to help make sure that bees, butterflies, and birds can feed and thrive from spring through fall.