



# The Rescue Gang!

At the Network office, a whole lotta caring going on

► **By Elizabeth Fowler**

The 32,000th case update has just been entered into the Best Friends Network case management system. And that's only since October 2002. How do we know that? Network manager Peggy Sutton was entering message number 32,001 when her computer informed her that the system that was installed last October could handle only 32,000 entries. That's been fixed, and it's now back to business as usual.

But what kind of an office handles that big a caseload in just a little over eight months?

It all happens in a small building called Frankie's Place, next to the Best Friends Welcome Center. You'll know when you're in the right one: It's always filled with chatter and chocolate and cats. Peggy arrives at 7:30 every morning to brew the coffee. Of course, it wouldn't be fair to say she's the first to arrive – the cats who live at Frankie's place work around the clock, and are always awake and ready to greet her no matter how early she unlocks the doors.

There's Sheldon, the office manager, who has his very own chair, including a heating pad when the weather gets cold. And Wolfgang, the resident mooch, who was such a wild attack cat when he came to Best Friends that he couldn't be within a mile of any other animals. Nobody's quite sure what Wolfgang does for a living these days, but he seems to have mastered the lunch hour. Any time you're eating, he's quick to jump on your desk and ask whether he might have a bite. Especially if it's spaghetti with a rich tomato sauce.

Then there's Lilli Marlene, the allegedly shy cat, who is secretly suspected of being sneaky, rather than bashful. She pops out, looks around, then pops back into the No More Homeless Pets office, perhaps bearing some kind of a report. And then, of course, you must meet the very reason for the building's name – Frankie himself. At one time, he was the office bully, scaring the human employees half to death with his masterful fighting techniques. But with the help of a little calming medication, he's learning to cope with his "issues." Not that anyone wants him to make a completely full recovery ... we wouldn't want Frankie's Place to become dull!

## **Pigs on the Move**

But back to the 32,000th case. While the cats take their respective places for the day, Jean Hansen begins the long task of listening to the voice mail that has accumulated overnight.

"Right now, we're trying to get some pigs from Florida to sanctuaries in Washington and Oregon," she explains. "So far, we've got them as far as Colorado. Now, where could they stay once they get to Idaho? Can't put them in a hotel – especially if the place serves

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bacon and eggs for breakfast!” Jean handles most of the calls from people needing to get animals from one place to another. Sometimes, she spends her days off driving them herself.

Jean’s pretty confident that she’ll be able to find drivers. After all, 14,000 members of Best Friends have signed up to be part of the Network, meaning that they want us to let them know if there’s a particular need in their own neighborhood – anything from helping in a rescue to designing a poster.

## My Simon

Next door, Peggy is patiently reading through a novel-length letter from someone requesting a home for some cats. All morning, she’s been sorting through requests for help. She deals with them by the hundreds, so do they all tend to turn into a blur? “Not at all. For example, I’ll never forget Simon,” she says. “He was a little black kitty living in the lobby of a vet’s office. He couldn’t use his back legs. A woman called saying this was a kitten who didn’t have a chance.

“I showed her some special needs websites, and she got so many replies from them that she could relax and select the best home. He dragged his back legs, so people sent baby pajamas with the skirt bottom so when he dragged himself around he wouldn’t get dirty. She’d send me the pictures of him all dressed up. I’d pin them up next to my computer. Someone even sent a little cart so he could scoot himself, and I got a picture of that, too.

“He was adopted by a lawyer who is very active in the humane movement.” (Peggy is especially pleased about that, being a former attorney herself!)

## Emergency!

In the next office, Beata Liebetruith is checking her overnight messages, phone and e-mail. On an average day, three to five of the early morning messages blinking at her will be a matter of life or death – “My husband’s going to shoot the dog” or “This animal only has until tomorrow.” And that’s before her morning coffee!

Then, throughout the day, Beata says, “Peggy comes and puts yellow sticky notes on the computer or on the desk – even when you’re on the phone!” Each sticky note represents a new urgent case. She estimates that she works on about 50 cases per day. “And that’s true of all of us,” she says.

Beata has a favorite kind of case, one that’s especially close to her heart. She always asks to be given any calls related to diabetic animals, because she’s had a diabetic cat of her own, and knows what the people are going through.

“In the last couple of weeks, I’ve saved two diabetic cats,” she says. “One of them was a 15-year-old cat who’d just been diagnosed. The people were totally shocked and didn’t know what to do. They were thinking of bringing him to a shelter. The first thing I tell them is that a diabetic animal does not do well in a shelter or sanctuary. Diabetes is a disease that really needs to be treated at home. Once you tell them, ‘Look, you are your pet’s best option,’ that helps.

“Then I explain how to care for them, and that we’re here for help and support every step of the way. I take the scare out of it for them. I think just talking to someone who’s been there really helps. Both of those cats stayed in their homes, and I’m still following up whenever the people have a question.”

On Beata’s wall is a photo of a diabetic dog she once helped place with a diabetic boy. The dog seems to look over her shoulder, smiling as she works.

## Building a Nationwide Network

Beata’s story demonstrates the joy of working with the Network, but there are inevitably going to be times when they can’t find the precise solution that someone is looking for. Among Network director Diane Blankenburg’s many tasks is calling back anyone who wasn’t happy with his or her dealings with the Network. Usually, it’s someone who wanted Best Friends to take an animal, and was disheartened that we couldn’t.

“I can usually find a way to help them understand,” says Diane. “And I think they appreciate that someone took the time to call them back.”

In the long term, she explains, the team is really helping Network members connect to *each other*, and encouraging callers and e-mailers to find help closer to home, in their own communities. With more than 32,000 case entries every eight months, their goal is to shift the focus from Frankie’s Place, and build support systems of Network members in communities across the country.

So did those pigs ever make it to Washington and Oregon? Jean says they’re on hold now, waiting for the summer weather to cool. Of course, 20 cases later, she probably considers that to be “old news.” Frankie’s Place moves that quickly. Hence, the ever-flowing coffee and chocolate.

But Frankie and his feline friends won’t let those folks work too hard. Part of their job is to remind those humans to slow down and remember what’s important ... like giving Wolfgang a lick of that spaghetti sauce. 🐾

To join the Best Friends Network and help animals in your neighborhood, visit the Best Friends website at [www.bestfriends.org](http://www.bestfriends.org).

