

# Two Great Volunteers + 26 Years = Help for 4,400 Feral Cats... and Counting

By Carla Schack

When most people see a feral cat living on the streets, they see just an animal. Some see a problem, knowing the pressure such animals can put on a community and the health risks to domestic pets. But Rita Deroche sees something more. She sees herself in these animals, and, making that identification, knows she has to help. Part of Rita's childhood was spent as a refugee during World War II. "I understand the animals living on the streets; hungry, cold... I look into their eyes, and I understand exactly how they feel." She also understands how it feels to have someone look away from your suffering, and when she and her husband Nic (both of Belgium, pictured top right) recognized the extent of the homeless cat problem in their adopted home, they felt they had to do something about it.

They started, as many animal advocates do, with a single cat. In January, 1977, when the Deroches owned a small motel, Rita found a stray calico and her kittens. At the time there was no model for what to do with feral cats, and no organization that actively dealt with the problem. They took it upon themselves to trap all of the cats, feed them and have them spayed and neutered so that they wouldn't continue the problem. When they moved to Carmel, CA they found more homeless, feral cats.

There was still a continued lack of organized support, so they began trapping, neutering and feeding their new feral neighbors. Their efforts continue, and Central California is today very appreciative of "Best Friends Animal Rescue."

That decision to devote their free time to spay and neuter feral cats has made a tremendous difference over the past 26 years. The Deroches have trapped and neutered over 4,400 cats, many at their own expense. Now retired and approaching their 70s,

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Rita and Nic are still putting their time, money and effort into the care of feral cats, both in Carmel and in Lake Tahoe, where they vacation. Volunteers in surrounding cities follow the Deroches' model of using feeding stations to draw in feral and



homeless cats and humanely trapping them for neutering.

Many of the cats the Deroches help are former pets, like the eight strays left behind on a Carmel estate when their owner passed away last year. The inheritor of the estate heard of Rita's work, but apparently misunderstood it. He called on her to "make them go away" as if they were vermin. Instead, Rita and Nic did what they have become so good at, finding and patiently trapping the strays, taking them to be spayed and neutered and releasing those who were not adoptable. They were again on their own. The new owner of the estate didn't even offer any money for their care.

Funding for the Deroches' work has been sporadic. Different private groups have sponsored them off and on for a few years. Larger shelter groups give some assistance, but almost 3,000 of the cats spayed or neutered have been paid for out of Rita and Nic's own pockets.

The Deroches have put their home, as well as their money, where their hearts are. Rita often takes in those with physical handicaps or other problems that may make them harder to place. They currently have 21 formerly feral housecats, who get along, travel with them on vacation, and reportedly all respond to French.

One of the obstacles to feral cat rescue has been the reactions of authorities. While the police in Carmel understand what the Deroches are trying to do and don't interfere, Rita knows volunteers in other cities who manage their feeding stations at night to avoid trouble. Rita Nelson, for example, who has known the Deroches for years and began working with them more intensively

when she retired, thinks that interference sometimes results from the volunteers having different goals. "There's sort of a stigma about people who feed stray cats - that they're sort of strange people," Nelson comments. She adds that, if the police don't realize that the feeding is part of a larger effort including spay and neuter programs, even animal lovers may disapprove. Just feeding the cats would lead to more reproduction and a larger overall problem. Rita Deroche is concerned about misunderstandings on the part of police but isn't sure how to convince them that the feeding stations and trapping are beneficial in the long term. "I think we need someone way above us to contact the police department there."

To some, of course, there doesn't seem to be anyone above the Deroches in their area. They have continued their work as different sources of funding came and went, even going on when the Humane Society they worked with in Lake Tahoe went bankrupt. On their last vacation, they spayed and neutered

94 feral cats, over 50 of them at their own expense. Twenty of the cats were rehabilitated and adopted.

Part of what keeps the Deroches going is the feeling that what they are doing isn't just good or right - it's



effective. Rita has seen a definite improvement in the feral cat problem in Carmel since she started her work, and credits the tireless efforts of her husband and other volunteers. "I think we can keep up with it now. I think we can control it."

As active as the Deroches still are however, they know realistically that they cannot continue the work forever. Rita has had open-heart surgery, and

Nic has been treated for cancer. Rita would like to see the work taken up by another generation, saying, "I hope that younger people can do it." But while they have inspired a good number of volunteers and helpers, there is no clear successor to take the lead.

"I'm not sure who could possibly replace them," Nelson says. "I suppose there are some people whom, if they were really challenged, could come forward and do it." But perhaps the thing about the Deroches which has made their story so inspirational is that they challenged themselves, with the memories of war and the knowledge that others might turn away. That self-driven dedication may truly be irreplaceable.

To volunteer or contribute, please contact Nic and Rita Deroche at Best Friends Animal Rescue, P.O. Box 6434, Carmel, CA 93921, or call (831) 646-1930. 🐾

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