

Puppy Kitty NYC
Leitner
5/10/26

In the corner of his carrier, Valentino, a rescue cat, scrunched in the slatted February sunshine, ear eaten up by a gangrenous infection, an eye swollen and weeping—a boxer’s on a bad night.

“A fight, most likely,” Yanirah Laboy, 34, manager of the nonprofit rescue shelter, Puppy Kitty NYC, guessed, peering toward the back of his box.

Rescues like Valentino were common for the organization, which every day takes in domestic, friendly, and injured cats from kill shelters across the city and off the frigid streets of Middle Village, Queens, to rehabilitate and eventually adopt out. Only

yesterday, Laboy worried he might not make it. Domestic cats like Valentino usually fared the worst outdoors, suffering critical injuries and often dying young.

Now, she was confident that with a few days' Panacur, a dewormer, and a negative blood test for Feline immunodeficiency virus—a common contagious virus that weakens cats' immune systems and a potential black mark against adoption—he would be on his way to foster care within the month.

“He stopped leaking, too, so that’s good,” she said, inspecting his mottled black tail for diarrhea.

For a while, she explained, it was like a running faucet, which made socializing him a little more than unpleasant. Now, she lifted him by the scruff with ease, administering the eye and ear drops that would see him to health.

Laboy adores cats. It was a passion which she (and her twin sister) only truly realized during the COVID-19 pandemic, when, laid off from her job as a waitress and stuck at home in Jamaica, Queens, where she lived with her mother, she began taking in the cats that snuck in through her open window at night to the reproof of neighbors and parents alike. Shortly after, she applied to help at Puppy Kitty NYC, where for the last five years, she’s worked almost every day as a volunteer, until her promotion to shelter manager in 2022.

“I get paid shit,” she said over the explosive bowel evacuation from a cat beside us. But, “I can never leave this place and feel like shit because I just helped a dozen cats.”

Like 150 other animal rescue organizations in New York City, Puppy Kitty NYC is a New Hope Partner, a rescue nonprofit registered with the Animal Care Centers of New York City, the city's only government-contracted shelter, to pull animals most at risk for euthanasia, rehabilitate them and rehome them.

The program was created to reduce the city's high rates of euthanasia (as high as 75 percent in the early aughts), while formally partnering with secondary rescue groups like Puppy Kitty to more quickly and easily identify and rescue at-risk animals. When the Animal Care Centers list an animal as a New Hope transfer, one of six Animal Care Centers' liaisons blasts off emails to qualifying rescue organizations and social media groups devoted to posting and promoting at-risk animals, like Manhattan's Linus and Friends, allowing them to pull the animals from the centers and move them into fosters.

Before 2003 when the New Hope Program was established, no formalized network of partner rescue organizations existed. New York City's only municipal shelter, the Animal Care Centers' Manhattan location, was euthanizing three out of every four dogs and cats at its peak in 2002. Though still high and rising, today that percentage is

half. In 2008, five years after the program's debut, adoptions directly from the Animal Care Centers rose 81 percent. In 2025, that amounted to about 14,000 animals.

But the partnership is not without its problems. Since its establishment, the Animal Care Centers have come to over-rely on these struggling rescue organizations, most of whom receive a fraction of its funding. Last year, nearly half of all Animal Care Centers' adoptions came from organizations like Puppy Kitty NYC, up 30 percent from the mid-'90s. And while many of these organizations were created expressly to help the ACC, many find it impossible to respond to the flood of emails the Animal Care Centers send out daily.

"These secondary nonprofits are supposed to be additive," said Nathan Winograd, Executive Director of the No Kill Advocacy Center in Oakland, California, who himself ran several no-kill shelters in New York City. "Now, these groups have become their de facto adoption program."

Without them, he believes, the Animal Care Centers' system would all but collapse, forced to either close their doors or return to the "dark-age" policies of the '70s and '80s when many shelters ran as "slaughter houses."

And yet, with the rapid rise of intakes and stray populations across the city—largely the repercussions of COVID-era policies—many are nearing their breaking

point. In February, I volunteered with Puppy Kitty NYC to understand just how near they were and what that meant for charges like Valentino.

My first day there, Laboy greeted me on the cluttered steps, tasked with showing me around the place. Besides the founders, Laboy is the shelter's longest-serving manager and its most knowledgeable. She wore black latex gloves, old jeans, and an oversized PuppyKitty sweatshirt rolled up to her elbows, over which draped long, curly hair. Flitting between cages, she moved confidently, but incessantly, like a nurse at a busy hospital, calling out each individual cat's name in her gentle rasp like they were her own, running through each of their medical charts in turn, marking times of doses and states of health: gum disease, parasites, dismemberment, infection. The whole operation felt more like an infirmary for the forgotten than a home for the adoptable. It was only 10 a.m. and already she had fed, cleaned and medicated about a dozen of the shelter's most infirm felines.

The house was small, no bigger than a two-bedroom apartment, with every last inch of wall space piled behind cages: some, like Valentino's, stacked one atop the other, roof-reaching, others placed on the floor, designated as popups when the overflow of new rescues grew unwieldy. On top of those was a makeshift labyrinth of even more open kennels, perching ledges, food bowls, and litter boxes. For a house that could comfortably keep 50 cats, there were about a hundred more, crowding in the back near the bathroom,

packed in scratching-tree colonies, and roaming free—“the cats in residence” one volunteer described them. From their heights they peered down at me, bounding over—and sometimes nearly on—my head, hissing or pawing when I got too close.

Laboy led me to a small alcove off the back, flipping the lights on to reveal a scratching-tower full of distempered felines.

“I call this the demon lair,” she said, referring to a room allotted for the shelter’s most ornery and implacable. In another, less forgiving shelter, they might have been euthanized, she told me. Few people have patience for cats so stubborn. But here, they were tolerated.

In the palpable silence, an overweight tabby, Charlie Brown—the shelter’s most senior resident (four years)—wheezed from heart disease.

“I really thought he was going to be dead three months ago,” she said, laughing. “And look, he’s still here.”

With so many cats packed in such a small space, the smell was unshakable: a melange of fur, tuna, and excrement that exuded from the house’s white-walled exterior like a foul miasma, reaching volunteers on the sidewalk long before they set foot inside. In the main room, an industrial-style fan venting to the outside was required to stay on at all times. This had been mandated by the landlord but did little to mitigate the odor.

In December, new legislation set stricter standards for pet shelters like Puppy Kitty, including updates to the organization's ceilings for better ventilation—which the organization completed last month—and renovation to their flooring—which they haven't— to remove the large cracks between tiles that cause injuries to cats.

“It's put off a lot of volunteer organizations,” Laboy said. “Many organizations aren't getting paid and some people just do it on their own time. Now you're telling them they have to meet these building standards?” She shook her head, staring down at the litter-strewn floor.

As of 2024, Puppy Kitty NYC was operating about \$100,000 over budget.

The ramshackle home was a stark contrast to the \$75 million Queens Animal Care Center that opened in 2024 only a 15 minute drive away. There, bright light floods in from big open windows and volunteers move with ease through the wide halls. Like Puppy Kitty NYC, the organization is a nonprofit, doing similar work, but while Puppy Kitty receives only small donations and fundraisers—totaling nearly \$1.5 million in 2024—the Animal Care Centers receive twenty times as much from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, a number which has steadily increased from the organization's partnership with the city in 1995.

We don't take any government grants, Laboy told me, mostly because it's really hard to get them. Instead, they rely on their social media "begging" and the little they scrounge from events like one-on-ones with cat mediums—an animal psychic who promises to relay your cat's thinking—and their semi-regular kitten therapy sessions.

Instagram remains one of their most useful applications for fundraising. Before I arrived, Laboy had already posted two videos of Valentino: the day Licari rescued him and his first vet visit. As Laboy explained, he had an injury, and, more importantly, a video of that injury. It was always easier to get donations and fostered with a video and a sad story, she said.

"The sadder the better," she added.

Recently, this disparity has frustrated some organizations who expressed displeasure at the Animal Care Centers' perceived neglect and mismanagement. In 2023, the nonprofit was sued by one New Hope Partner, The Home Stretch Dog Haven, for what it claimed was improper care and wrongful euthanasia of a dozen dogs. Over its 31-year history, the nonprofit has been audited five separate times for failures in sanitation, animal welfare, and overcrowding, most publicly in 2015, when then New

York City Comptroller Scott Stringer released a litany of failures, including putting animals' health at risk, which ended with 18 recommendations for further oversight.

Cristina Greenfield, a former volunteer for the Queens Animal Care Center, was more sympathetic in a phone interview one late May evening. In March, she quit her ten-month stint with the organization after complications with her work schedule, but while she was there, she said, she marveled at the enormous effort of all the volunteers, some of whom worked eight-hour shifts unpaid for years.

Like at other shelters and rescues, the hardest part was finding and retaining people. Normally, the Queens shelter kept on rotation at least ten volunteers, but occasionally it was only her and another for a shelter that kept 150 dogs—well over its capacity of 70—all of whom needed to be walked for fifteen minutes in her two-hour shift.

“Most of these dogs hadn’t been walked for 23 hours,” she said. “Sometimes, I’d walk ten dogs at one time. I don’t know why I did that. It was exhausting. I’d come home and couldn’t move.”

With a recent surge of strays and abandoned animals, though, problems for the Animal Care Centers have only gotten worse. Intakes at the Animal Care Centers across New York have risen about a sixth from 2020 with euthanasia rates far outpacing that rise, increasing 60 percent over the same time. In June, the Animal Care Centers

suspended animal intakes for the first time in its history, leaving much of the rescues up to New Hope Partners.

Some experts, like Winograd at the No Kill Center, argue that it's the Animal Care Center's own policies that have led to the artificial crisis: a combination of cumbersome applications, long wait-times, required appointments, restricted visiting hours, and waiting periods.

"Just give us the dog so we can give him a home," one prospective adopter complained to me in May, filling out the Animal Care Centers' detailed application in the Harlem heat. She was just one of three to leave the facility without entering it in a twenty minute span. It's unclear if they returned.

Others like Laboy, shelter manager of Puppy Kitty, believe the problems are more systemic: everything from illegal breeding operations and increasing homelessness to the misguided thinking around Trap, Neuter, Release, a process that involves trapping feral male cats, neutering them to curb reproduction and disease, clipping their ears for identification, then re-releasing them into their street colonies. During COVID many Trap, Neuter, Release programs shut down, worsening an already bad stray problem.

"Some people think it hurts the cats to spay or neuter," Laboy said. "Well, if I couldn't talk and got pregnant for the third time in three years, I'd hope to God somebody came and gave me a hysterectomy, too."

But getting those neutering sessions is hard. The biggest servicer for spay and neuter is the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, whose services are in such high demand, they often get booked up within minutes of being released.

As one volunteer from the Brooklyn rescue Heidi Wrangles Cats put it, “It’s like getting Taylor Swift concert tickets.”

Back at Valentino’s cage, two hours after his ear and eye medicine, Laboy compulsively checked her phone, wading through the 150 unread text messages she received since her shift started.

“I work 24/7 from 7 a.m. when I get here until I close my eyes,” she lamented, sifting through a cabinet inundated with prescription-labeled bottles and finger condoms. She was looking for the intravenous fluid bag she had to administer to Valentino. “I’ve been burnt out completely three times already, and a week-long vacation once a year isn’t going to help that.”

She moved over to the wary cat’s cage. Twice daily she had to inject him with enough liquids to get him through the afternoon. “He just won’t drink.”

Since volunteering at Puppy Kitty, it was a procedure she learned quickly, along with others like vaccinating, blood drawing, and microchipping. With veterinary costs so expensive, these in-house procedures were necessary. And cutting costs for the shelter is a must. Each cat's vet bill can run about \$1,000 with dental being the most expensive—some cats needing three dental procedures in a lifetime.

Helping her hold the bag of fluids was another volunteer who worked with Laboy for almost a year, uncommon in the cat-shelter world. Like many of the long-haulers, she came with her own war-scars and stories, including the time she had to be rushed to the emergency room when a “spicy” cat nearly chewed her hand tendon in two.

“It’s important to hold him still,” Laboy said, bundling Valentino in a tattered quilt and preparing the needle. She worked there long enough to understand the dangers to volunteers of cornered cats—painful cuts, vicious bites, and the all-too-common Cat Scratch Fever, a bacterial infection passed from cat to human through a scratch or bite. Indeed, in one of several mad dash flights from her lap, I thought Valentino might make good on her warning before Laboy eventually subdued him, as she so deftly could. She turned her head at the smell of him between her arms.

The work was enough to put off even the most kind-hearted volunteers, nevermind a mildly neurotic reporter with OCD. And the day had just begun.

For volunteers like Angela Connell, longtime friend of Puppy Kitty President Meagan Licari, trying to staunch the torrent of cats has been exhausting and never-ending.

For over two years now, Puppy Kitty has been operating at peak capacity, she told me, a month later during one of my three volunteer training shifts.

Three months ago, in December, cages filled the walkways where they had already begun to appear, just one of many repercussions from the Animal Care Centers' summer intake suspension and the brutal winter. With the return of spring and "kitten season" now upon them—where cats go into heat and overrun shelters—they likely would be again. As of March 2026, almost 200 cats were listed for adoption on Puppy Kitty's website, not including recent arrivals.

"I'm completely blown out of my mind," Connell said. "When I'm not at my other job, I'm thinking about this. It's nuts."

Connell, 56, was with Licari when she took the organization from her garage to the house in Middle Village in 2021. She considers herself a "very competitive person" who would like nothing more than to "sort the problem out." Five years later, though, without any end in sight, she's burnt out, she said.

At some point, she told Licari, it's got to stop. "You're saying yes to every damn cat. We've had four landlords in a year and a half. It's torturous," she said, referring to the

string of outposts the organization opened to cope, including a warehouse the nonprofit operates in the neighborhood.

Having spent years in the rescue community, she seemed to understand how deep stewardship waters ran. Behind us, she was careful to latch the two double doors the shelter always keeps locked, a precaution against “crazy people,” she told me.

“Sometimes we steal people’s cats and they come looking for them,” Connell said. “They don’t deserve them.”

In one story, Connell recalled trespassing on a privately-owned industrial warehouse with another American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals volunteer to steal the manager’s two “mousers,” cats released onto a property to kill mice and rats. These “bigwigs,” she told me indignantly, think they can just do whatever they want without considering the repercussions of an un-neutered cat roaming the streets at night. But two weeks later, those same “bigwigs” got another two mousers to replace the ones Connell took.

But recently, it seemed, that passion in volunteers was getting harder to come by.

“Some are just unreliable,” said Connell, who spent the whole of my second shift, without much luck, interviewing potential candidates in the back of a laundry room where they quarantined the cats with ringworm.

Some of the biggest disqualifiers: a man who conducted the whole interview with a comb in his beard; a woman who “scared the living daylights out of her”—no further elaboration provided; and a girl who vaped halfway through the session.

“Call me old-fashioned,” Connell said, whipping out her own vape in a show of solidarity, “but maybe you don’t smoke in an interview.”

But perhaps more germane was just how hard the work was, a reality I’d soon confront during one of many unpleasant tasks relegated to me that month, including but not limited to communal pooper scooper—a lackey who hauls around a 50-gallon trash can and pans the shelter’s litter boxes like a California gold miner—and feral cat feeder, which proved as daunting as it was unsafe (At the behest of one exasperated shift-lead, I soon learned to use a plastic arm extension grabber after flinging a bowl of food on the floor in fright.)

“A couple scratches won’t kill you,” the refrain went, a fact many of the years-long volunteers had the scars to prove, with one even rolling back her AC/DC sweatshirt to show me: a mauve crosshatch that ran from her wrists to mid-forearms.

When I asked why she willingly returned, she replied, “It’s relaxing.”

My last volunteer shift was in April, three weeks after I started. As I'd eventually learn, sticking your hand in a feral cat's cage was neither relaxing nor a catharsis from my day job, as another volunteer suggested. For others like Laboy, though, it was.

It's what made them essential to the operation, Connell said.

As my first shift wound down, I'd ask Laboy, opening her fifth can of Frisky's for the cats' afternoon buffet, if there was anything she was looking forward to—anything relaxing. She leaned back against the counter and stared up at the newly renovated ceilings. As a matter of fact, there was a national animal expo in Las Vegas, which she and her twin were planning to attend. She had begun to tell me about it, when another text message interrupted her thought. The founder, Licari, was eager to fill the only three empty kennels in the shelter with more cats from the Animal Care Centers and wanted Laboy to transport them. She sighed and returned her phone to her back pocket.

"If we have the space, we might as well use it," she said.

There was a fine line between pet rescues and hoarders, she acknowledged toward the day's end—a distinction she and other volunteers seemed to share, evidenced in the many cautionary tales that cropped up in lulls, of organizations and rescuers who took on more than they could handle, only to burn up like a comet in just a few short years. Laboy was clear though, most of their cats would get adopted. They couldn't keep them. That wasn't their job. Even the toughest among them, like a Russian Blue beside her who

rarely left her carrier and hissed at everyone, just needed more socializing, more time to be themselves.

And what happened when that didn't work, I asked, referring to the cowering feline.

"She'll probably stay," she said, staring into the shadowed box. "We just grow attached."

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