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Extending Reach: Penn Vet's Shelter Medicine Club Teams With Field Services to Provide Care to Barn Cats

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BY HELEN RADENKOVIC

It is beautiful Saturday in March, and a team of three Penn Vet students in the Surgical Opportunities Program are driving from West Philadelphia to farm country in Maryland. The SUV is packed with an anesthesia machine, medical equipment for spay and neuter procedures, donated vaccines and medical supplies and polar fleece blankets.

“We expect to spay or neuter between 10 to 30 feral barn cats today, depending on how fruitful the capture efforts of the local farming community turn out to be,” said Rachael Kreisler, a new Penn Vet 2012 graduate who served as past-president of the Pennsylvania Student Chapter of the Association of Shelter Veterinarians (PSCASV) – more simply known as the Shelter Medicine Club. Dr. Kreisler was also the founder of the PSCASV’s Surgical Opportunities Program.

The PSCASV Surgical Opportunities Program is a student-directed clinic providing the manpower for every step in the process of high-quality/high-volume surgery, including performing or participating in the majority of the surgeries, every Saturday and Sunday at two Philadelphia shelters. Since its inception in March 2010, a total of 217 Penn Vet students have participated, and this year they’re on track to perform about 4,500 cat spays and neuters.

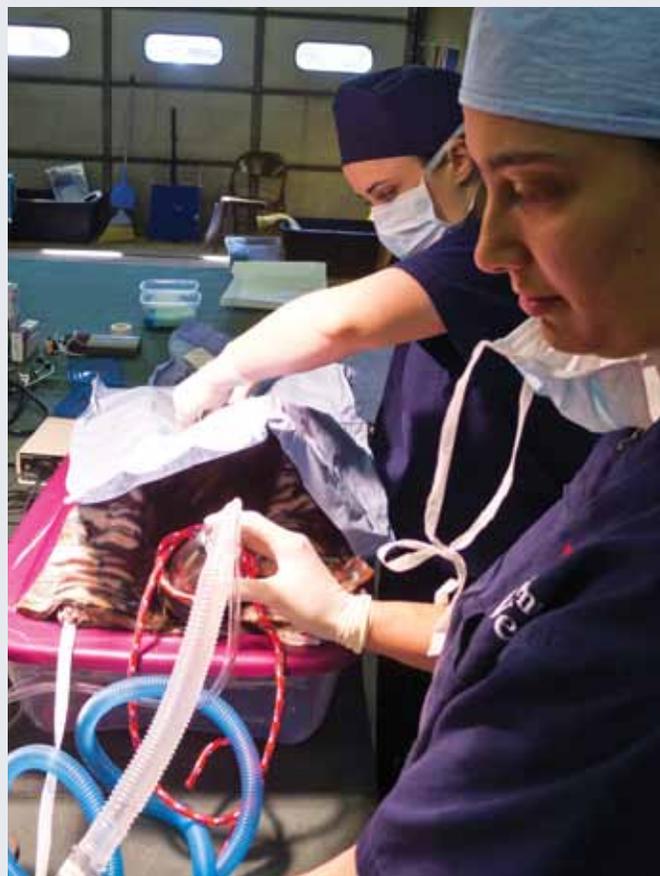
Typically, student groups are deployed at Philadelphia’s animal control facility, ACCT, and the Pennsylvania Animal Welfare Society – today is different. Instead of the densely populated urban shelters, the students are headed into the country. The Shelter Medicine Club has partnered with Penn Vet’s Field Service, which provides routine and emergency health care for equine and food animal clients within a 30-mile radius of New Bolton Center. Both groups have the same goal: to help local farmers manage their feral barn cat population and decrease risk of infectious disease, like rabies, on their farms.

We pass many farms on the way to our destination – some manicured and some more rustic. On a day like this, the Maryland farm country looks idyllic, but as we

arrive at our destination, it becomes apparent that this community of farms operates on very modest resources. Those resources are spent on care of dairy cows and the farm itself; the feral cats that have made these farms their home get a roof over their heads, but they are otherwise self-reliant.

The farm owner gives us a warm welcome, and we see another recent Penn Vet graduate, Hillary Herendeen, and a Field Service Resident, Dr. Kim Crowe, setting up the spay/neuter field clinic in a large garage on the property. They have also recruited four local volunteers to help monitor cats as they wake up from anesthesia. Two small gray cats are already awaiting their health check and spay procedure in a chicken coop, and two large males are in cat carriers.

One of the community volunteers is canvassing the neighborhood to let all farmers know that Penn Vet has a





Left to right, Hillary Herendeen, Kim Crowe, Rachael Kreisler, Morgan Nabhan, Olivia Nathanson.

makeshift clinic down the road and to catch and bring their barn cats for sterilization and vaccines. Farmers are asked to pay a modest fee for the surgeries, necessary medications and vaccinations. All the proceeds are invested back into the Shelter Medicine Club for more supplies for future efforts.

SCRUBBING IN

Dr. Crowe has already set up an operating area, a recovery area off to the side with heating pads and fleece blankets, and a prep area for the patients. The students are scrubbed in, and the first cat is up – her surgeon is Dr. Herendeen, who has performed hundreds of cat and dog procedures, and has volunteered more than 40 times in the urban locations since March 2010. She handles her sleeping patient with great delicacy; her cuts are deliberate and meticulous.

Olivia Nathanson, V'15, the junior surgical coordinator for the Shelter Medicine Club, has spent more than half of her weekends since arriving on campus volunteering in this program. The cats' caretakers stay and watch, and Olivia cheerfully explains the process and each step to them. To date, she's performed more than 70 cat spays and neuters and is one of the on-site team leaders.

With Dr. Crowe's on-site leadership, the entire event is well organized, and patients flow through each station and into recovery with efficiency. She makes sure to keep in constant contact with each student, the farmers and the volunteers. Rachael's spay surgery is done in about six minutes; the entire process – from starting with the awake cat to awakening in recovery – totals about 30 minutes.

At the end of the day, 19 cats have been spayed or neutered, vaccinated for rabies and received treatment for ear mites and various conditions. In addition to sterilization

surgeries, the students also cleaned and treated a large wound on one of the females, an infected abscess on one of the male cats, and three respiratory infections. Right after the end of this barn cat event, Dr. Crowe and Dr. Herendeen head back out on Field Service and turn their attention and skills upon a cow with a prolapsed uterus – a more typical patient.

"I love a day like this. It reminds me why I wanted to become a vet," said Morgan Nabhan, V'15, on the ride back to Philadelphia. Morgan has completed more than 35 spays and neuters in the Shelter Medicine Club.

GAINING AN ADVANTAGE

The Shelter Medicine Club volunteers manage a full academic load, and still dedicate more than 12,000 hours (inception to date) of high-value surgical service to the local shelter and now farm communities. Penn Vet students participating in the Club's Surgical Opportunities Program graduate having completed an average of 60 spays – 10 times the average performed on ST and/or shelter medicine elective rotations. Penn Vet is producing a group of confident, skilled professionals with a broad understanding of pet over-population and infectious disease challenges.

The collaboration between Penn Vet's Field Service and the Shelter Medicine Club is a valuable opportunity to educate the future generation of veterinarians about a variety of issues involving homeless pets in different environments, all while helping farmers with limited financial resources to maintain safe, healthy farms. It is the close relationship between Field Service clinicians and the farmers with whom they work, and the spirit of collaboration among Penn Vet clinicians that culminated in this wonderful project. 🍷