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### Precious Gems

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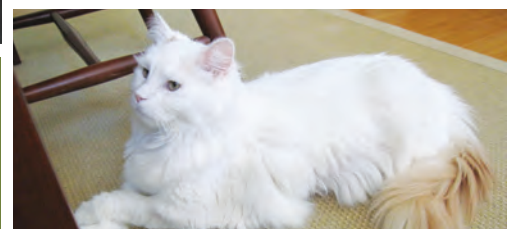
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Dr. Lillian Aronson, Susan Gabriel, and Lynn Beale with the cats, Diamond (held by Lynn) and Amber (held by Dr. Aronson).



## Precious Gems

BY HELEN RADENKOVIC

### AMBER'S NINE LIVES

Amber is one of Susan Gabriel's five beloved, pampered cats. But don't let his majestic appearance fool you. Amber has faced great difficulties, including major, life-threatening diseases over the years.

Eight years ago, Susan found Amber – just a tiny kitten at the time – walking the streets with his brother and mother. Susan decided to give them a loving home. When Amber was just 18 months old, he was diagnosed with a congenital diaphragmatic hernia and benign liver nodules. Amber needed a very risky surgery to fix the hernia.

When the surgeons at Penn Vet started the procedure, they were shocked by what they saw. Amber's internal organs were inside of his chest cavity, as though he had sustained massive trauma to the body. The surgery was successful, but unfortunately, the difficult experience was not Amber's last.

In 2012, Amber returned to Penn Vet for a cystotomy to remove bladder stones. Then, in May 2013, Susan received news that all pet owners dread. Her beloved Amber, who had already overcome so much hardship, was in acute kidney failure. Only one procedure – a kidney transplant – could save him from this life-threatening condition.

### THE PENN VET TRANSPLANTATION CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

Organ transplantation is one of the most challenging and complex procedures in modern medicine. Although an

established practice in human medicine, transplantation is virtually unheard of in veterinary medicine.

In fact, Penn Vet's Ryan Hospital is one of only two veterinary hospitals on the East Coast that performs feline kidney transplants, and one of only three renal transplantation programs in the entire country. Dr. Lillian Aronson, Professor of Surgery, founded Penn Vet's Renal Transplantation Program in 1998. To date, she has successfully completed 150 procedures.

Three male cats, each with distinct, winning personalities, currently reside at Ryan Hospital, ready to be matched to a cat in need of a kidney. Following a transplant, the owner of the kidney recipient is required to adopt the donor cat, since no animal is ever euthanized for the program.

These special donor cats were selected by veterinary technician Lynn Beale from a group of homeless cats at the York SPCA. Chosen for their highly social natures, the cats are known as Jellybean, Butterbean, and Garbanzo. Their gift of a kidney will provide a second chance at life to an ailing cat – and years of joy to the cat's owner.

Once Lynn leaves the SPCA, Penn Vet assumes full responsibility for the well-being of the cats, investing resources in medical screenings to ensure that they are viable kidney donors. Cats that are not viable donors due to organ size or underlying congenital diseases are placed into forever homes.

Presently, 90 to 95 percent of cats receiving kidney transplants at Penn Vet recover sufficiently and return home following transplantation. Approximately 70 percent of these cats are alive and well one year after the

Diamond acclimates to his new home.

Center: Diamond and Amber cuddle on the couch.



procedure. The longest survivor to date lived a happy, healthy life for 14 years following his transplant, and just passed away this year.

Renal transplantation is a major decision for any pet owner, requiring a considerable emotional and financial commitment. When faced with the decision of whether or not to proceed with Amber's transplantation surgery, Susan did not hesitate. "I would do anything for my cats," she said. "Amber's life was in danger, but there was a procedure to give him a chance at a quality life."

Dr. Aronson's successful track record, paired with the extraordinary surgical and critical care resources at Ryan Hospital, gave Susan the confidence to proceed. "It all came down to Penn Vet for me. The care my cats have received there has always been excellent. The surgery was risky, but if Amber had a chance of doing well, it was because his procedure was done at Penn Vet and because it was done by Dr. Aronson." It is this confidence in Penn Vet that motivates Susan to be a dedicated, enthusiastic ambassador for Ryan Hospital and the School.

Amber's surgery was incredibly successful. Dr. Aronson jokes that Amber "read the book on transplantation" the night before the procedure. Although Amber's surgery was straightforward, transplantation cases are typically complex and challenging. Three of eight cases in the last year have required hemodialysis in order to stabilize kidney function before surgery. Spearheaded by Dr. JD Foster, an internal medicine veterinarian specializing in hemodialysis and extracorporeal therapies, Ryan Hospital's dialysis service is poised to change health outcomes for dogs and cats suffering from a range of ailments, including kidney failure, toxicity, and infection.

Ryan Hospital is one of only five veterinary hospitals providing hemodialysis on the East Coast. Notably, Ryan Hospital is also the only veterinary teaching hospital in the nation offering kidney transplantation *and* hemodialysis under one roof. This impressive distinction makes Penn Vet a Transplantation Center of Excellence, attracting clients from as far away as Texas, California, Canada, Brazil, and Kuwait, seeking life-saving treatments for their beloved pets.

## THE MOST PRECIOUS GEM

For several years, Susan has worn two custom-designed rings bearing the gemstones for which her living and late cats are named – Amber, Jade, Mother of Pearl, Pearl, Opal, Onyx, and Ruby. She is preparing to add another stone to symbolize the newest addition to her family, the kidney donor cat, whom she has appropriately named Diamond.

Diamond's name holds a very meaningful sentiment. His gift of a kidney saved the life of a cherished companion, and therefore Susan believed he deserved to be named after the most precious stone of all.

Diamond is full of exuberance, bringing a new energy into Susan's home. He has become a playmate to Ruby, a big, bossy tomcat who, before meeting Diamond, instilled more fear than friendship in the other cats. Diamond and Susan also have a very special bond. "He gets so excited when I come home. He squeals, chirps, meows, and runs right up to me!" And although Susan loves all of her cats, Diamond has found a special place in her heart and in her household. 🐾