

Thayer bringing corporate skills to nonprofit Cat Depot world

Shelley Thayer used to spend her days hobnobbing with corporate executives, working to market such household consumer products as Pepsi and General Mills.

But when she volunteered to help rescue animals displaced during Hurricane Katrina, her life took a turn she never expected. Thayer left the corporate world and joined the nonprofit world of animal rescue, trading in her business suits and lunches at fancy cafés for shorts and sweaty afternoons caring for injured and abandoned animals as a volunteer with Best Friends Animal Sanctuary.

Thayer eventually became the circulation director for Best Friends' national magazine. Now she is bringing her combination of marketing and animal rescue experience to Sarasota as the new executive director of the Cat Depot, a nonprofit, no-kill feline shelter organization about to expand to a new facility and a new program targeted at public education. Though her two careers could not have been more contrasting, Thayer sees parallels.



(From l.) Shelley Thayer, new executive director of the Cat Depot; Dave Turgeon, project manager of the Depot's new shelter; and Cat Depot co-founders Linda and Ken Slavin. The four are positioned in what will be one of the "pods" at the new shelter that allows cats to roam freely in an area about 12 feet by 12 feet instead of being enclosed in small cages. Photo by Christine Hawes.

"It's all about change," says Thayer. "There's nothing constant in marketing, except maybe branding, and it's the same in the animal world. We're constantly looking for what we can do to better serve the animals."

Thayer takes the helm at Cat Depot just as the organization prepares to move from its current 2,500-foot facility on North Washington Boulevard into a 10,000-foot, state-of-the-art shelter on 17th Street just west of Tuttle Avenue.

The Cat Depot's new home includes large pods that allow sheltered cats to roam freely, a double-filtered air-conditioning system that more effectively removes cat dander and hair, epoxy-coated surfaces that help prevent the accumulation of waste and bacteria, and set-aside meeting rooms where members of the public can meet with the cats they are considering for adoption.

To help support the expanded duties that will come with the expanded facility, Thayer is leading Cat Depot in its first-ever membership drive. She will also coordinate the Cat Depot's public education campaign, increasing the organization's role in educating the public – especially youngsters – about kindness to animals and how better to care for cats, including ferals.

"We are committed to the community as their educational and informational resource center, and to providing a feline adoption center in which everyone can participate with pride," Thayer says.

Thayer's new role with a growing Cat Depot is a perfect fit, says Faith Maloney, co-founder of Best Friends and someone who saw Thayer in action at numerous rescue efforts.

Maloney remembers watching Thayer help during the Big Cat Rescue in the deserts of Nevada, when Best Friends saved hundreds of cats that had been hoarded and left in filthy conditions and 120-degree heat.

"I was extremely impressed with her," says Maloney. "It struck me back then that she was the kind of person that there wasn't anything she wouldn't do. She's the real deal. She understands the creature, and then she also understands how to get the story across."

Thayer says she looks forward to tapping deeper into Sarasota – what she calls a "very kind" and "beautiful" area – than the Cat Depot ever has before. She also hopes to engender some changes in the area's attitude toward animals.

For one, Thayer says she hopes to influence landlords to be less restrictive of animals in their rental properties. It's a goal Thayer set after transplanting here quickly from California, searching for rentals and realizing that owning pets eliminated her consideration from about 80 percent of the rentals she encountered.

"I would love to see that people did not have to hide their pets from their landlords," she says, joking that "my new motto is 'Two cats per lanai.'"

Thayer also hopes to influence the area's policies toward feral, or community, cats which are free-roaming outdoor felines. She noted projects in numerous cities, including Jacksonville, that illustrate a government-funded spay and neuter program costs less, and better controls the population of feral cats, than the more widespread approach of calling animal services to euthanize them.

"I think there is some education that can be brought to the forefront," Thayer says.

For now, however, Thayer's focus is providing financial stability to the Cat Depot's new shelter and education programs. Her goal is to raise \$500,000 within a year. One upcoming step geared toward that goal is

"If You Give a Cat a Cupcake," an Oct. 17 event for children ages 3 to 7 featuring a book reading, face painting, shelter tour, cupcakes and an educational segment titled, "Kids and Kitties: Learning the Basics."

"The Cat Depot is going to be a wonderful way to teach kindness to animals, which teaches kindness to others" Thayer says.