

QUEENS NEIGHBORHOODS

They May Not Need All Nine Lives

Thanks to Ravenswood activists, cats have a chance to escape from dangerous places

By Jesse Serwer

For as long as Olga Duell can remember, there have been stray cats hanging around Ravenswood Houses.

Duell, who has lived in the Long Island City public housing complex for more than 35 years, estimates there are hundreds of cats calling Ravenswood's 38 acres and 31 buildings home.

"They go into the basement to keep warm," said Duell, who occasionally fed strays until diabetes forced her into a wheelchair several years ago.

The cats make their way into ground-level crawl spaces that lead to the buildings' ventilation system. For years, according to Duell and other tenants, the city Housing Authority's efforts to seal vent openings have resulted in the deaths of countless strays caught in the crawl spaces at the wrong time.

"The cats die right under my apartment and horrible smells come up from the basement," said Irene Richter, a tenant of 27 years who said she began noticing odors every fall about a decade ago. "The air gets awful," added Richter, who has been feeding, caring for, and even administering antibiotics to a gray tabby she calls Phillip for several years. "It is like a cemetery for cats down there."

But Housing Authority officials say there are no strays at Ravenswood.

"Our people have gone through the buildings, inspected each one and they have not found any cats,"

said spokesman Howard Mader, who said vents are closed to stop rats from infesting the buildings. "We're going to do everything we can to keep rats off our property — if it means sealing vents to the basement, that's what we're going to do."

Duell said that in all her years at Ravenswood she has never seen a rodent. "Not even a mouse," she said. Richter argued that cat carcasses actually attract rodents and other pests into the basements.

When residents learned of plans to again seal the vents earlier this winter, they decided to take a stand, enlisting the aid of Joe Mora, an American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals volunteer and animal rescuer who lives a few blocks from the complex.

"You can't always see the cats — they're sleeping in the crawl spaces, which people can't get into," said Mora, who believes ASPCA enforcement officers were misled by a Housing Authority official who took them only to Ravenswood's management building, which has no crawl spaces, in the fall.

Learning vents had been sealed for as long as a week in mid-December, Mora alerted Mike Pastore, director of field operations for Animal Care and Control, the city's animal welfare agency, who convinced Raven-



Photos by Jesse Serwer

A cat rests on a perch at the Ravenswood Houses. Joe Mora, left, is an ASPCA volunteer who is trying to remove cats who may be in danger of being trapped when the air vents are closed.



swood manager Marcia Rosero to allow Mora to re-open the vents. The vents remain open, but they will

Manhattan veterinarian, where it died and was sent to the Department of Health for testing — is documented, and Mader maintains maintenance crews have found no carcasses.

Instead of bringing the mostly feral, unadoptable cats to a city animal shelter, Mora has been relocating them to stray colonies at several Long Island City industrial locations. There he practices what is commonly known as "Trap-Neuter-Return." The ASPCA, through its ASPCA Cares program, supplies him with 825 pounds of cat food a month.

Trap-Neuter-Return is the "only proven way" to reduce the feral cat population, said Animal Care and Control executive director Ed Boks, who is developing a program to legitimize the care of strays by providing low- or no-cost spay-neuter services to people who manage colonies like Mora's.

"It reduces the number of cats in a colony and virtually eliminates the problem without killing," Boks said. "A lot of folks who are caring for these cats are doing it covertly."

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be closed again, said Mader.

"I basically asked, 'What positive qualities could come out of this?'" Pastore said. "'Open up the vents and let us get the cats out before you close them up. But if cats turn up dead, you'll be charged with animal cruelty and have a major problem.'"

Although the Housing Authority insists there are no cats at Ravenswood, Mora gave a reporter a copy of written authorization from Rosero to trap the cats.

"The first snowstorm of the year I was out there from 4 in the afternoon to 11 at night opening every vent with a tire iron," Mora recalled.

Mora said he has trapped and removed 44 cats from Ravenswood since December, but he believes many more might have met their end inside the vents. The death of only one — which was taken to a