



# Build a sanctuary and they will come

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The life of a fanatic is a hard one, and Joyce Smith's life is no exception. At 77, she's locked into a schedule that could kill someone half her age. She rises at 6 a.m. after sleeping just a few hours, and immediately starts to work. There's no time for breakfast. When you live with more than 100 cats, their needs come first.

The cats in the house are merely the overflow. Outside, there is a building with about 300 more, plus a sundry collection of pigeons, parrots, rats, raccoons, squirrels and a pair of feral dogs that look like an ill-advised union between the Queen Mother's corgi and a hyena.

Welcome to Second Chance Wildlife Sanctuary. Opened by Ms. Smith 10 years ago on a farm north of Pickering, the operation offers a final hope for hundreds of injured, lost and unwanted animals.

There has been a steep price to pay. Ms. Smith has battled provincial authorities, scrambled for money and worked around the clock. She has breathed in so much cat hair that she was once forced to spend several months on oxygen. "I'm a bit odd," she says. "I admit it."

Ms. Smith has the resilience of a battle commander. At the moment, she is teetering on the verge of bankruptcy, thanks to a flood of new animal arrivals, yet remains confident that things will somehow work out. "I'm always going broke," she says.

Ms. Smith opened Second Chance, an operation that resembles a cross between Mother Teresa's Calcutta clinic and a zoo, in 1996. Before that, she spent 25 years caring for animals in her house in Pickering (and dealing with angry neighbours).

Although the farm location has eliminated that problem, other woes have arisen. Most significant has been a sharp increase in numbers. Ms. Smith's operation now deals with thousands of animals a year, mostly cats.

"People are ridiculous," she says. "They get cats they don't care about, and they don't spay or neuter them. Then they think they can put them to sleep just because they don't fit their lifestyle."

Originally, the animals were kept in an outbuilding. When that filled to capacity, Ms. Smith began taking cats into her house, which now serves as a humbling testament to the depth of her commitment. There are 17 litter boxes, which are changed in an endless, Aegean-stables-style task. The air is saturated with the competing aromas of cat urine, cleaning fluids and Febreze air freshener -- she keeps several dozen spray bottles on the go. She has become accustomed to the smell. "I still notice it," she says. "But it's not offensive."

Ms. Smith's own requirements have been subjugated to the needs of the feline empire. The woodwork has been clawed so much that it looks like driftwood, and cat hair coats the furniture like a layer of alpaca fleece. Ms. Smith sleeps on the sofa, covered with cats. She rarely eats, since any food preparation brings an onslaught of cats. Her diet is confined to small, hasty snacks of food that cats don't find appealing, such as cereal.

The shelter is a shoestring operation. The farm is on loan from golf course developer ClubLink Properties. A small team of volunteers comes in each day. Ms. Smith receives no income from Second Chance, and lives off her federal old age pension. The costs of caring for so many animals are astronomical, regularly running to more than \$8,000 a month. (Among the costs is \$28 a month to trim the lower teeth of a rabbit with a condition that makes them keep growing.) The money comes from donors, adoption fees and fundraising.

There have been run-ins with the province. In 2001, the Ministry of Natural Resources seized some wild animals from Ms. Smith, including raccoons. Provincial regulations forbid private citizens from keeping wildlife, for reasons that include the safety of humans and the protection of species. Ms. Smith isn't buying it. The ministry, she says, euthanizes too many animals: "What harm was it doing for me to save some wild animals?" she says.

Ms. Smith's infatuation with animals began as a child, when she lived with her parents on a Durham farm. Almost every day, she came home with some new creature -- rabbits, orphaned raccoons and lost baby squirrels. Her mother kept them in a box near the wood stove.

At 9, she and her mother nursed an injured bird back to health, then released it from the back porch. For Ms. Smith, watching the bird fly up into the sky and become a dot in the distance was intoxicating: "That was the best feeling I ever had," she says. "I helped a creature."

As an adult, Ms. Smith often took in strays that were given the run of the house. At times, she had a dozen animals on hand -- a fact that may have played a part in the breakdown of three marriages.

Today, Ms. Smith remains committed to her belief that all creatures are equal, and that lives must be protected, no matter the cost. She refuses to euthanize animals unless they're suffering. "We don't get to play God," she says. "Life is more important than money."

Ms. Smith sees each animal as an individual. And she can feel their pain. "To me, the saddest part is the cats pining for people who don't give a damn about them," she says. Ms. Smith recalls a couple who showed up with their two teenaged children and a cat they no longer wanted because it didn't fit their lifestyle. Ms. Smith told them the cat was their responsibility.

"I guess we'll have to pay the vet to put it down," the couple replied.

Ms. Smith took the cat, which became part of her vast brood. "The cat stared out the window as they drove away," she remembers. "They didn't even look back. My heart broke for that cat."

As Ms. Smith sees it, she is the prisoner of human selfishness. "People care more about themselves than anything else," she says. "I'm not a sweet little old lady. I'd kill some of these people if I could."