

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The pale tabby kitten wasn't moving.

At three weeks old, the kitten, Sharkboy, weighed half as much as his tuxedo-coated sister, Lavagirl. When she'd opened the crate to see her newest foster kittens, Lavagirl had scuttled out excitedly to explore, but Sharkboy just lay there.

"It's okay," Courtney Raatz, a Charlotte Animal Care and Control foster volunteer, told the kitten.

Sharkboy didn't move.

Raatz leaned in to get a better look at the kitten. Sharkboy was shaking, his little legs scraping against the crate as he tried to stand. Raatz placed the kitten on the ground, and Sharkboy slumped to the floor with a tiny meow.

Raatz moved quickly, taking Sharkboy to his heating pad and starting Parker Protocol, using a syringe to drip a mixture of corn syrup and water into Sharkboy's mouth every three minutes. Time slowed to a crawl. Raatz moved only to check the time and rub warmth into the kitten's tiny back.

After two long hours, Sharkboy pushed to his feet and began taking slow, wobbly steps toward her.

Raatz sighed in relief. Her little foster had made it.

As shelters nationwide struggle with post-pandemic overcrowding, foster volunteers like Raatz are vital in providing temporary homes and lifesaving care for vulnerable animals. Animal fostering has become a lifeline, helping to ease shelter strain while providing emotional and psychological benefits to animals.

With shelters struggling to keep up with the influx of animals due to increasing care costs, fostering provides a practical way to improve animal welfare and create shelter space for those in need. Volunteers like Raatz are key to keeping these animals alive and out of kill shelters.

"North Carolina has the third highest euthanasia rate in the country," says Sandra Stover von Dohlen, head of communications at Beautiful Together Animal Sanctuary. "We work to save as many as we can from overcrowded shelters. We need fosters to be able to do that."

While shelters provide primary care and safety, the environment can be overwhelming for many animals. “There’s so much going on,” Stover von Dohlen explains. “They can be overwhelmed, terrified, anxious, claustrophobic. Sometimes, they’re just heartbroken from whatever they went through before they ended up here.”

Shelters need fosters for animals of all ages and temperaments—seniors who need quiet, recuperative homes, dogs with anxiety who thrive better in calm environments, and even animals recovering from surgery who need extra attention.

Fostering gives these animals a break from the stressful shelter environment and the chance to recover in a more personal setting. A study by the Department of Psychology at Arizona State University shows that dogs removed from kennels and placed in foster homes exhibit reduced stress levels and improved behavior. Spending just one or two nights in a home can lower dogs' cortisol levels and increase restfulness.

“One thing that really helps them a lot is going to events and getting them out in new environments where they can meet people,” says Savannah Wooten, a volunteer with A Better Life Animal Rescue, Inc. A recent study of over 25,000 dogs showed that those who went on short outings or temporary fostering stays were five to fourteen times more likely to be adopted than those who stayed in the shelter.

The fostering process starts with a simple application to assess experience and preferences, after which organizations like Beautiful Together match the foster with an animal that fits their lifestyle. Volunteers provide temporary care, socialization, and love, helping animals adjust to life outside the shelter and preparing them for adoption. Many rescues offer supplies such as food, crates, and medication if needed.

“We are responsible for the medical expenses of all our animals,” Gwen Hood, president of A Better Life Animal Rescue, Inc., says. “Most of the funds we receive through donations and fundraising go toward medical expenses.”

A Better Life Animal Rescue, Inc. is a no-kill foster rescue organization in Burke County, North Carolina. It does not operate an animal shelter and relies entirely on volunteer foster families to care for rescued dogs and cats. Hood sponsors many of its volunteers.

“It helps people who wouldn’t normally have the means to foster,” Wooten says.

Foster caregivers offer much-needed stability and compassion to animals with a history of trauma, neglect, or abandonment. Raatz, who has cared for more than 50 kittens in her three years of fostering, rotates her animals constantly. She specializes in

neonates—kittens between three and four weeks old who are often in high demand for foster families as they require around-the-clock care.

“Fosters can be sick, have fleas, not be litter trained, not know how to play with toys, so they use your furniture,” she says. “I usually quarantine my fosters in a bathroom for the first two weeks to ensure they’re healthy. Otherwise, they can spread viruses, parasites, and fleas all over the place.”

Raatz has picked up a range of skills through her fostering work. “You can prepare by researching,” she says. “The Kitten Lady on YouTube has taught me so much. Jackson Galaxy is also a great resource for training and behavioral issues.” She’s learned basic medical skills, including recognizing conditions like fading kitten syndrome, a set of symptoms in neonatal kittens associated with failure to thrive.

The commitment may seem intense, but foster volunteers like Raatz, who works as an analyst at LPL Financial, find the experience deeply fulfilling. “When I don’t have fosters, my apartment always feels so still, like dead air,” she says.

Raatz's most challenging fosters were a pair of feral kittens, “spicy,” she called them, who were especially fearful.

“They were about five weeks old and hissed every time I went near them,” Raatz says. “They hid in their crate whenever I was in the room and were just terrified.”

Raatz limited her interactions to refilling food, water, and litter to earn their trust and sat quietly nearby, letting them adjust to her presence. Gradually, the kittens became less fearful as they realized they weren’t in danger.

After a week of this routine, Raatz began hand-feeding and petting them while they ate. “They started to see they liked pets. They were no longer just looking to hide,” she says.

Eventually, the kittens grew comfortable enough to greet her at the door. By the time they were ready for adoption, they were affectionate and seeking out cuddles. “A friend of mine now has those two, and they’re super sweet,” Raatz says.

Although it’s often difficult for foster volunteers to say goodbye to their animals, knowing they played a role in preparing them for their forever homes makes it worthwhile. “I know there are always more kittens who need care,” Raatz says. “When they grow to be healthy and stable, when they’re playing, sleeping, purring—those little moments make it all worth it.”

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**Sources:**

[The Influence of Brief Outing and Temporary Fostering Programs on Shelter Dog Welfare](#)

[Animals play an important role in many people's lives and often help with therapy, rehab, etc. Learn more about the possible benefits of pet companionship.](#)