

Dedicated to the cause

Sue Dobbs celebrates the ups and downs of being an Adoption Centre Manager

I still remember clearly the day 15 years ago when I retrieved the weekly newspaper *The Recorder* from the bin after throwing it away because I had an uncanny feeling that there was a job in it for me. I initially dismissed the feeling as my children were both very young and I wasn't actively seeking work but eventually decided to take a look. Imagine my surprise when I saw the advert for Cats Protection Bridgend Adoption Centre Manager. As I read the advert my surprise changed to excitement,

the job could have been tailor-made for me, and I believed I had the right combination of animal care and management experience to make a success of the job. My father had always had a passion for animals which he had passed to me; I grew up on a smallholding and helped care for a variety of small and large mammals, birds of prey and reptiles. After finishing school I started working for the family business managing our farm shop which sold things like animal feed and equipment. I also continued in college part time and attained an intermediate diploma in animal welfare.

I heard that my application was successful in March 1998; this was another memorable day. Sadly there had been a fire at the centre overnight due to an electric fault and one cat had passed away and another had suffered smoke inhalation. The HR team telephoned me to let me know that I had the position and could I please go the centre to see if I could offer any assistance. This was my initiation into a role which has seen happy and sad times, highs and lows, great strides forward and setbacks but most importantly of all helped rehome over 18,000 cats and kittens.

A vital hub

Bridgend Adoption Centre is one of the largest and busiest centres in the UK and includes homing, admission, maternity and isolation wings. We have 121 pens in total and can have over 250 cats and kittens in our care when full to capacity. Each wing has its own kitchen area and tray wash; we also have an operating room enabling our vet to neuter and carry out minor surgery on site.

My role is very varied and no two days are the same – I often go into work with a plan for the day only to find it derailed by the day's events. I have to smile as I read back over the last sentence; just as I wrote it a very distraught member of the public arrived unexpectedly in the centre with a mum and four kittens. She initially said that the cats belonged to a neighbour who couldn't cope any longer due to having too many cats. I sat down to have a chat with



Sue and a resident



Agatha and kittens

Photo: Sue Dobbs

her and after a lengthy conversation she admitted the cats belonged to her and she was at the end of her tether. By the time I sorted out pens to accommodate mum and kittens, arranged for them to be admitted and for the remainder of the cats in that home to go on the waiting list, the vet had arrived at the centre and it was time to assist with our weekly vet run so this article had to go on the back burner for the rest of the day.

The daily routine

My typical day would start with briefing the team on which areas they are working in, bringing them up to date with relevant information for the day and arranging for cats to be transported to the vets for routine ops such as dentals. I would then walk around to check all the cats in the centre for any signs of illness and arrange for them to see the vet and move to isolation if necessary. Responding to emails and phone call is next on the agenda, followed by dealing with correspondence, signing off invoices and forwarding them to accounts for payment. I would then check for any empty pens in homing wings, arrange for ready-to-home cats to move up and new cats to come in from our waiting list.

Depending on the day of the week my next jobs might be to do the ordering, prepare for and assist the vet with the vet run, organise rotas, deal with staff annual leave requests and performance management, log income on to spread sheets, deal with the banking or catch up with general admin. As well my day-to-day routine duties, I plan open days at the centre and other fundraising events such as the Catathon, fire walks and glass walks.

I also work with the media to raise the profile of the centre through news articles, radio and TV interviews. I also have been involved in several work groups with National Cat Centre to help develop new concepts and ideas.

At this point I have to say that I have a great team of deputies, cat carers, receptionists and volunteers working with me to deliver the highest standards of cat care, customer service and fundraising, as well as assisting with staging events and delivering talks in schools and the community. The success of the centre wouldn't be possible without everyone's hard work and commitment.



Sue hot foots it for CP



The usual suspects

Photo: Sue Dobbs

Getting to play dress up

One of the highlights of my time working for Cats Protection is the Catathon Guinness World Record Attempt for the largest gathering of people dressed as cats. This attempt took place in Bridgend town centre during June 2012. This was an especially poignant day for me and one I will remember for the rest of life. I had started planning the event in December 2010 after having a Eureka moment when the idea for the Catathon was born. It happened following a record event for the largest gathering of elves in Bridgend and a piece on the news about a similar attempt for Santas; the thought just flashed in my head, 'We can do this with cats'. I shared my idea with a few colleagues who all thought it was a great one so we started to make plans to hold the event during the summer.

The last thing I expected at the time was for a visit to my GP in January 2011 to lead a diagnosis of bowel cancer. I had to put the event on hold while I underwent chemo and radiotherapy treatment but I never lost sight of it. Somewhere along the way I decided that this would be my come back event. I had my first all clear in October and this gave me the green light to go ahead to start planning the event.

I don't think I will ever be able to properly convey the emotions I felt as the Catathon plans came to fruition and 213 people came together in a colourful montage of cute kitties, wild whiskers, posh paws and marvellous mogs. We didn't manage to set a Guinness World Record but the event was a hugely successful and created it a lot of buzz with cat lovers in all parts of the UK. We are planning a second attempt at the record during CatFest 2014. This is our 20th year anniversary celebration event taking place in the centre on 16 August 2014. Our current record stands at 213; we need 250 human cats to set the record so we are looking to paws-ively smash this.



Snap happy

A great passion of mine is photography; working in the centre I have no shortage of beautiful feline models waiting for the right moment for me to snap a perfect pose. This has proved invaluable when it comes to promoting our centre and the great work Cats Protection does through the media. A good photo will often sell a story far better than a hundred words, so I always make a point of photographing cats and kittens with an interesting story to tell. I regularly send these pictures with press releases to the local media and as a result of this we have had both local and national exposure on TV, in the newspapers and online.

One such story is of Agatha and her kittens named, Christie, Marple, Jessica, and Sherlock, Morse and Kojak. The kittens were found in the cab of a truck in the yard of HMP Parc Prison when they were a couple of days old. Agatha proved very elusive to catch so the kittens were brought back to the centre for bottle feeding while plans were made to coax the mum. Agatha was found 24 hours later and happily reunited with her kittens. This story was covered by several local and national papers generating a lot of publicity for our centre.

The future's bright

When I initially started writing this article I thought I would struggle to put enough on paper but now I find that I could happily continue writing for another few pages. When I think back over the 15 years I have spent as Bridgend Adoption Centre Manager it feels like a moment in time. It hasn't all been plain sailing and there have been many challenges along the way but I can honestly say that I feel very privileged to be working in my role for Cats Protection.

On a personal level my love for my job as well as the support of family and friends gave me the focus and determination to return to work very quickly after my treatment and I am looking forward to continuing to do the best I can for the amazing furry felines at the heart of our charity. ●