

A Cat Named Frances

Frances was born in the spring of 2007, by the best estimate of her caregivers, Colin and Carolyn Collins, and first appeared on the back deck of their next-door neighbor, Rhetta Lowndes, on Odingsell Court, shortly thereafter. She was not the ordinary feral kitten common to Dataw Island at the time, but rather a Siamese-Himalayan mix whose beauty was more associated with a warm and safe window seat than a tenuous existence in a lowcountry marsh. Where she came from was never determined, but it was thought that she was the offspring of a short-haired black cat from the DIC pool and tennis court area. In any case, once she discovered the abundant food, fresh water and comfy porch swing, she never looked back.

That's not to say she also accepted Rhetta's overtures of care and affection as she put down her daily meals, but for the next three years she ate the food, sunned on the deck, and produce several litters of kittens, some that looked exactly like her, and some that definitely did not. Several of her kittens were adopted by Dataw residents and quickly realized the advantages of being a "domestic" cat. Some are still with their Dataw families today.

The last batch of kittens and mama were trapped by Carolyn in 2010, shortly after the Dataw Island Feline Foundation (DIFF) was established to help stabilize the island's feral cat population by preventing more litters and insuring that Dataw's neighborhood cats would be healthy, free of infectious disease, and fed every day by dedicated volunteers. Frances and her kittens were examined by the vet, given vaccinations, neutered or spayed, and identified with an ear notch. By then Carolyn and Rhetta shared the daily feedings – Carolyn when the Lowndeses were out of town.

All but one of the kittens were adopted, and the last one, the spitting image of her mom, went to foster care until she too found a Dataw home. In the meantime, Frances was returned to her back deck and quickly took up from where she left off, except that she now had a much better chance at a healthy, longer life without the constant breeding and violent aggression inherent in a feral existence.

Over the next 11 years Frances reluctantly shared her feeding dishes with several different cats that would come for a time then move on, which was fine with her! But things changed in 2016 when the club's swimming pool renovation began and disrupted a colony of three cats who had staked out their territory between the pool

and tennis courts. One of the cats was a sleek, totally black, nine-year-old short-hair named Slick, who decided to strike out for new accommodations. He didn't have far to go from the tennis courts to Odingsell Court and Frances' back deck. Popular belief among several DIFF members was that Frances was his mother, but she did not welcome him back – quite the opposite!

Slick was not impressed with the initial hisses and growls from Frances when he showed up to share her dinner. Back at the pool he had been “top dog” and perhaps thought that he could handle Frances as well. Carolyn attempted to smooth things over by feeding them on opposite sides of the deck, although Slick kept a wary eye out because Frances loved to ambush him while he ate. But try as she may, Frances could not drive Slick off, and Slick decided to accept her as the alpha of their two-cat colony. As Frances gradually became more tolerant of Slick's presence, Carolyn was able to move his dishes to the same side as hers, but at a discrete distance apart. However, they did continue their ritual of checking out each other's food dishes before they settled in to eat. Being the more social of the two, Slick tried his best to make friends but Frances would have no part of it. As time passed, their arms-length relationship became okay for them both and their routines were well established.

This continued until 2019, when Carolyn and Colin sold their house and moved to another home on Dataw. Since Rhett and Bill were seldom on Dataw anymore, Rhett kindly agreed to allow the DIFF feeders to continue feeding the displaced cats full time on their back deck. Led by Carolyn, DIFF's band of volunteers worked out a schedule to make sure that the cats were fed by someone every day. Once they figured out the routine they accepted the new location and the variety of feeders that showed up weekly.

For the next two years cats and caregivers settled into their respective schedules and, more often than not, Frances and Slick were waiting on the deck each morning for their breakfast, but maintained their distance from the feeders. Frances had a brush with a urinary tract infection in December of 2020, when both she and Slick were trapped and taken to the vet. Both were re-vaccinated for rabies and Frances received a long-lasting antibiotic shot. They were released back at their deck dining area and all was well until the fall of 2021.

The feeders began to notice changes in Frances' appearance and behavior. She seemed thinner and her coat was not well-groomed. For the first time, she would invite them to pet her, rubbing against their legs and meowing softly. Because at age 14 she was definitely a senior cat, they kept a closer eye on her and shared occasional photos and

their concerns about the approaching winter weather.

On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, she was found with a badly congested and very snotty nose which was making it difficult for her to breathe. It was quickly agreed that she needed to go back to the vet and Carolyn managed to capture her and put her in the carrier for the trip. Once again she received antibiotics and had her nose cleaned out with instructions to keep her confined for a few weeks to monitor her progress.

Carolyn and Colin took her back to their home and set her up in their garage in a large cage with food, water, a litter box and bedding. Frances had never been caged in her life and the stress, along with the scary noises of the garage doors, the car and golf cart right next to her, and the falling temperature outside, didn't make for the ideal recuperative setting. An alternative safe place had to be found, but she couldn't stay inside their house because Carolyn is highly allergic to cats. The call went out to the DIFF membership and the ideal location was soon found in the separate guest house of a member who was not expecting company for the holidays. Frances and her cage were moved to the warm and quiet surroundings of her assisted living apartment on an early Saturday in December.

Now alone, Slick was at a loss without Frances. He greeted feeders with loud yowls of discontent, as if they could make her reappear with the dishes of food they offered. He seemed inconsolable even as each feeder spent a little more time with him than usual, trying to assuage his loss. But he wanted only his companion of the last five years.

Back in her apartment, Frances responded cautiously to the offer of a heating pad placed under her bedding and for the next few days enjoyed a warmth she had never before experienced in her outdoor existence. She became ravenous, eating the food as often as it was offered. And her water bowl had to be refilled several times a day. On the fifth day she abandoned her warm bed and lay on the cardboard flooring in the cage. During the next few days the food remained uneaten for the most part and the water remained in the bowl. She became less responsive, her legs curled under her and her head bowed. Records had been kept daily of her food and water intake and general condition in preparation for what became more and more inevitable – another consultation with the vet.

That phone call was made on Friday, and after all the records and her condition were discussed, the vet concluded that Frances was suffering with diabetes. Her advanced age and the fact that she was feral and could not be medicated on a regular basis, gave him no alternative but to recommend humane euthanasia to end her suffering. The

next day, her longest and most faithful caregivers, Carolyn and Colin, took her to the vet for the last time and stayed with her to the end.

Some would say, she was only a feral cat – one of too many. And in one sense they would be right. But to all of DIFF's members, her long life was a testament to why we devote our time and care to Dataw's neighborhood cats whose welfare depends upon us. There is a Chinese proverb: "If you save a life, you are responsible for that life." When our cats are trapped, treated and released, we follow through with feeding, monitoring their conditions and, as much as possible, tracking where they roam throughout the island. We name them, have photos of them, and more often than not, talk about them as if they were our personal pets. And when we lose one of them we feel the loss deeply.

Frances has given us a rare gift in return for her long and healthy life; she stayed with us from the beginning of DIFF to her death over 14 years later. Her life was the best validation of our mission that we could have. By helping us learn more about her stages of life and the complications, we can better care for those she left behind.

The kitties thank you, and we thank you. Rest in peace, sweet Frances.

