

Helping victims, paw by paw



DIARY
MERLE
ENGLISH

On the first trip, the volunteers barked like dogs and meowed like cats to get the attention of stranded and stray animals who needed rescue. By the third trip, they had found 20, reuniting them with owners where possible and giving medical care where needed.

Now, they're going back to do it all again.

They are the volunteers who accompanied Garo Alexanian, founder of Companion Animal Network in Flushing, to Louisiana in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to help the most helpless victims — the pets.

"Whoever goes there once goes back," Alexanian said. "If we stop going to feed and trap them, they're finished."

The group made hundreds of food and water drops on its first trip, often by going door-to-door with other rescuers at abandoned homes.

There were estimates of about 500,000 animals in the area, of which about 15,000 were rescued and close to 2,500 reunited with owners. Some were strays.

With a used SUV that he purchased and equipped for the purpose, Alexanian and his organization, which adopts stray animals and finds homes for them, will return in February and stay for three months. Six volunteers from Denver and Cincinnati will join him. More has to be done quickly to prevent the dogs from forming dangerous packs that might attack returning residents, he said.

Alexanian recalled that first trip, when conditions were dangerous and unpredictable. Venturing into the Elysian Fields area, a low-lying section of New Orleans where water rose to rooftops, the rescuers found it deserted and eerily silent.

"Not a leaf moved," Alexanian recalled. "Everything was gray. All the houses were the same one color. There were no



NEWSDAY PHOTO / KEN SAWCHUK

Garo Alexanian with Katrina, one of many pets rescued in New Orleans after the hurricane

squirrels, no birds. If you saw something move, it was either a dog or a cat. They clung onto trees. We would bark like dogs and the dogs would bark back at us. I took a speakerphone to amplify my voice."

"Most of the dogs were running away, all emaciated, weak, but they could still run," Alexanian said. "The strategy was to put food and water down so they would have something to eat. The ones boarded up were worse off; no light, mold, mildew and bacteria."

At first, the work seemed impossible. "The first 24 hours you feel, 'I can't do this. I can't stand this heat anymore.' The discomfort level is so high,

your mind and body says, 'I can't stay.' But you force yourself to stay. You see yourself adapting to what the animals endured for several weeks without food or water."

Officials made available to the volunteers a list of pet owners and 10,000 addresses. "At the most, 1,000 have been visited," Alexanian said recently, "but the major organizations are pulling out." His group is one of fewer than a dozen small volunteer groups from across the country that continue to feed and rescue animals there, he said.

The ASPCA in New York City has poured more than \$8 million into the rescue and

reunification of pets with their owners by way of grants to agencies that took animals and to humane societies in Mississippi and the Gulf region. Julie Morris, a senior vice president, said the agency will spend \$4 million more, and has sent about 30 people into the area.

"They can't stay for more than 10 days. It's very tedious," she said. An ASPCA consultant from New York, working with the ASPCA in Louisiana, will conduct a massive spay, neuter and recovery plan over the next two years, Morris said.

"It's hard to say how many animals are on the streets now, and we're not finding many dead," Morris said.