

VOLUME 162. NO. 48

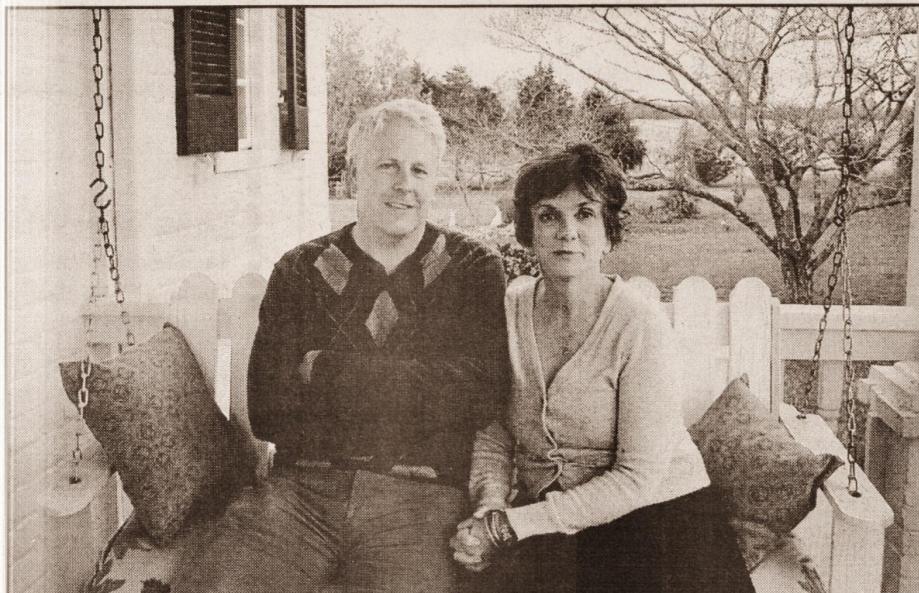
Rappahannock Times

"Established 1850"

Wednesday, November 30, 2011

Undergoing Painful Shot Treatments

Rabid Cat Attacks Essex Couple



Lewis and Kat Shepherd are currently undergoing rabies treatments after being attacked by a rabid feral cat at their Upper Mount Landing home earlier this month.

ERIN KELLEY

An Essex County couple is undergoing a series of painful rabies treatments after being attacked in their home by a feral cat that later tested positive for the disease.

Lewis and Kathryn "Kat" Shepherd, who live at Mahockney, a historic home off Mount Landing Road, said the cat was one of three "adorable" feral kittens that had inhabited their potting shed since their birth last spring.

The Shepherds said they had tried unsuccessfully to capture the cats to have them spayed and inoculated, but had never given any thought to the idea they might provide a threat.

"They had just been cute little kittens and all of the sudden he had a different look in his

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eyes," Kat said.

On the evening of Nov. 14, Lewis first noticed one of the kittens acting strangely. It was in the herb garden, an area of the yard the feral cats had previously left unexplored. While that, in and of itself, was not particularly alarming, the cat was inexplicably wet on a dry evening. The scene was odd enough for Lewis to notice, but not so strange as to cause him distress.

The next morning, Lewis said, the cat was uncharacteristically friendly. It approached him on the porch.

"This was completely out of character," Lewis said, but he thought little of it.

Lewis reached down to pet the cat when, "all of the sudden it lunged and bit me on the finger."

Still not aware of any real danger, Lewis cleaned and bandaged his wound before taking a flight to Seattle for business.

"We didn't know anything about the stages of rabies," Kat said.

The incident was all but forgotten the next morning when Kat rose early to let the couple's four dogs out.

Almost immediately after they got outside, the dogs began barking and howling, Kat said.

When Kat opened the door to see what all the fuss was about, the dogs charged full force into the house, carrying the cat with them.

The cat had attached itself to one of the dogs and was attacking it viciously, Kat said.

"The cat is on the dog's face. The dog is shrieking; the other dogs have gone to hide," Kat said.

It was when she was trying to get the cat off the dog that Kat first realized she might be dealing with a rabid animal.

"Then it jumps and it attacks me," Kat said.

The cat attached itself to her leg, scratching and gnawing violently.

"It was like a Stephen King movie," Kat said.

Kat said she grabbed a nearby carpetbag and began beating the cat with it, in an attempt to deflect the assault onto the bag rather than her person. The strategy worked and Kat was able to toss the beast out of the house.

"I then went online to see how much time I had left," Kat said.

Kat decided she needed to get immediate medical treatment.

"Then I realized that in order to the hospital, I had to get to the car," Kat said. And, in order to get to the car, she had to get past the ferocious feline.

Kat grabbed an antique frog gigger kept on the porch to fight off further attacks from the cat as she made her way to her vehicle.

Once at the hospital, she contacted Lewis in Seattle to tell him about the attack and warn him "not to bite anyone."

Animal Control Officer John Lee went to the home and captured the cat, which according to the Shepherd's leapt at Lee as he mounted the steps to the front porch. Tests later con-

ducted in Richmond confirmed the cat was rabid.

Kat received 40 shots that day in the emergency room, two in each of her wounds. Lewis received 10 shots. They are both still undergoing treatments, receiving shots at regular intervals to prevent them from contracting the highly fatal disease.

"If you don't get the shots you die," Lewis said.

And, for Lewis, the attack on Kat may have been a blessing in disguise. According to the Centers for Disease Control, "after exposure [to the rabies virus], the incubation period [in humans] ranges from one to three months, but may be quite variable."

Without any further indication that the cat was rabid, Lewis might have continued to treat his wound as nothing more than a nip on the finger from a spirited kitten.

"If I hadn't been attacked by that cat he wouldn't have known," Kat said.

The Shepherds said all the feral cats on their property have subsequently been captured and put down.

"To have to destroy all these cats was difficult," Kat said.

And they said they have begun to take precautions so as not to inadvertently invite any more unwelcome visitors.

"There are a lot of people who will put food out on their porch to just feed anything. They should know it's dangerous," Kat said. "They should know, for people who have to go through this, it's not pleasant."