

THE TALK

TRIBUNE VOICES

Cats fly in style on way back to PAWS Chicago



MEGAN CRAIG

This holiday season could have gone very differently for two cats who found themselves far from home just before Christmas.

Tapioca, a quiet feline with white and orange spots and more than a few pounds to spare, had been relinquished with another cat from the same household, Tiffany, an expressive brown tabby, to Regional Animal Services of King County, in the Seattle area. Although the two were loved, a child in their family had developed an allergy and couldn't be with them anymore.

So instead of knocking ornaments off the bottom of the Christmas tree and awaiting Santa from their beds, this 8-year-old feline duo found themselves in an unfamiliar situation.

But thanks to the efforts of PAWS Chicago, the city's largest no-kill animal rescue organization, Tapioca and Tiffany are, if not home for the holidays, at least a bit closer.

According to PAWS Executive Director Sue Davis, the organization microchips every animal it adopts out. That way, if an animal is returned to a shelter other than PAWS,

that shelter still can link the animal back to the Chicago organization, which is committed to taking back animals it has adopted out if the animal is relinquished.

"Once a PAWS animal, always a PAWS animal — no matter where they end up," Davis said.

Even if where they end up is more than 1,700 miles away.

When PAWS learned that one of its cats (and another from that household) had landed in a Seattle shelter, volunteer program manager Christi Dineff and Kristen Jahnke, director of animal operations, set to work figuring out the logistics of flying two cats halfway across the country.

Because PAWS is a not-for-profit organization, it can't spend its limited financial resources on such trips. Instead it relies on volunteers to spend their time — and, in cases like this, their frequent flier miles — retrieving PAWS animals from far and wide.

Davis said trips like this happen a few times a year. Recently, a volunteer on vacation retrieved a dog in Florida, another picked up a dog in Denver and one volunteer offered his personal jet to pick up a cat in Minnesota.

In the case of Tiffany and Tapioca, an email to about 4,000 PAWS volunteers turned up Lynne Styles, who had already



PAM MELAND PHOTO

PAWS Chicago volunteer Lynne Styles meets Gene Mueller, director of Regional Animal Services of King County, at the Seattle-Tacoma airport in Washington state last week. In the crate is Tapioca, one of two cats transferred to Chicago.



MEGAN CRAIG/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Tiffany, an expressive 8-year-old tabby, lounges last week on PAWS Chicago Executive Director Sue Davis' desk chair.

planned a trip to Portland, Ore. A frequent flier and retiree, Styles jumped at the chance to make a side trip from Portland to Seattle to get the cats to Chicago by Christmas.

"I love animals, I love PAWS and I love travel," Styles said.

She enlisted the help of Pam Meland, a friend of

more than 30 years, and promptly had her flown from Chicago to Seattle. The women met with staff from the Seattle-area shelter at the Seattle-Tacoma airport, the handoff was made and the cats were on their way.

Tapioca didn't just fly cross-country — she flew in style. Because airlines place

limits on the number of animals allowed in each cabin, Styles and Tapioca sat in first class. Meland took Tiffany in premium economy. Though cats are notoriously bad travelers, Styles said neither animal made a fuss about the journey, which also included two car rides.

"They were probably seven hours in transit. I didn't know what to expect, so we just thought we'd wing it and do the best we could," Styles said. "They were remarkable."

After a complete medical work-up, the cats are ready to make it the rest of the way to new homes. They were officially put up for adoption Wednesday, and though the hope is that they'll leave the shelter together, "the most important thing is that they get good homes," Davis said.

"It's been a tough year for them, so we want to make sure they're re-

homed properly," she said.

(The PAWS Chicago adoption center at 1997 N. Clybourn Ave. is closed Christmas.)

Though it took a lot of organization, some time and her own money to get the girls back to Chicago, Styles said these cuddly cats were obviously worth saving.

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat," she said.

And that kind of commitment makes homecomings like this one possible, Davis said.

"Without the kindness of our volunteers to go out of their way to help, wonderful teamwork ... and loyalty of PAWS to each and every animal they save, these two cats might have met a sad fate," she said.

"Kindness, teamwork and loyalty turned a tough situation into a happy ending for Christmas."