



# Fairfax County Animal Shelter NEWSLETTER

[www.fairfaxcounty.gov/animalshelter](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/animalshelter)

June 2023

## Letter from the Director The Truth About Breed

At Fairfax County Animal Shelter (FCAS), we treat every dog who comes into our care as an individual. We take the time to assess each dog to learn more about their behavior and needs. Then, we work to find each dog a home with a family that will match their unique personality, including their quirks, sociability, and activity level.

Yet, something has always held us back from fully embracing each dog's individuality—assigning subjective breed labels to our dogs. The truth is that most dogs who come into the Shelter don't arrive with a DNA test and we have no idea what breed they are. So, we take our best guess at visually identifying their breed.

Advances in canine DNA testing have demonstrated that visually identifying a dog's breed is unreliable. Furthermore, researchers are also finding that [characteristics we attach to certain dog breeds](#) are often based on stereotypes.

Katherine Wu's recent Atlantic [article](#), *Humans Can't Quit a Basic Myth About Dog Breeds*, tackles the notion of breed. She writes, "Experts agree that *dog behavior* is the product of a multitude of factors—among them genes, development, socialization, and environment; they disagree on the ratios, the measurements, the ways in which they swirl together. The key ingredient in every recipe, though, is always us: the people who fancy themselves the arbiters of what makes a dog a dog."



Nearly a decade ago, FCAS removed breed labels from our adoption kennel displays. It's time to take that further and transition away from breed labels completely. This will require patience and some trial and error, but I'm confident we can figure this out together.

- Reasa D. Currier, Director,  
Fairfax County Department of Animal Sheltering



## Bringing Tiny Tina Home:

When Cat Adoption Doesn't Go as Planned

By Katherine Zenzano, Humane Education Coordinator



When we adopted our cat, Tiny Tina, almost exactly one year ago (on June 30<sup>th</sup>), I was confident in both my choice of pet and in my ability to introduce her to my children. Within 24 hours of bringing Tina home, I questioned both.

I first met Tiny Tina when I was walking into work at the Shelter. As I passed by room 173, I saw a small, juvenile tuxedo cat with big round eyes

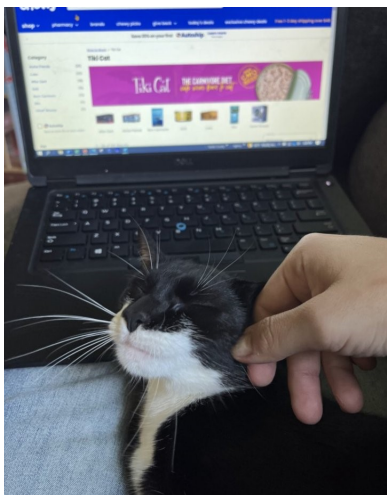
and huge dilated pupils that made her look like something straight out of a Disney movie. I instantly opened her cage door and began petting her as she threw herself into my hand, purring loudly. "This is my cat," I thought. I just knew she would be perfect for my family and that she would do really well with my four-year-old son and eight-year-old daughter.

Several days later, I was bringing Tiny Tina home in a carrier and I could not wait to introduce her to my kids. I brought her home while the kids were still at school and daycare. Tina walked around the house, confidently checking everything out.

I heard my husband and kids pull up in the car and I waited for them to open the door to see Tina, who was standing in the foyer. It was going to be perfect! As the door swung open, Tina became paralyzed, her eyes locked on the two kids in the doorway. "Kitty!," they both yelled in unison as Tina took off down the hallway, desperately seeking refuge in the bedroom. My heart sank, and I immediately thought, "Oh no, I chose the wrong cat." Days went by and Tina hid under our bed anytime the kids were around.

I knew it was time for me to take my own advice and to implement several of the techniques and practices that I had taught to adopters for years. Here are a few of the things that I did:

**I accepted that this was a transition and that transitions can be stressful—for humans and pets.** I reminded myself that bringing home a new pet could be like this—that in fact—the chances of it being a seamless transition were low. Animals are complex living beings who, in a stable environment, are constantly adapting to their surroundings. It would only be reasonable to experience stress when moving from one environment to another.



**I let go of any unfair expectations that I had of my new pet.** Okay, so maybe Tina wasn't the best cat with the kids but eventually she turned out to be pretty good with them. We so often go into adoption with certain expectations, e.g. adopting a cat so that it will be best friends with an existing cat or adopting a dog so that he will go on nice, long walks. But what happens when the cats don't really care for each other or the dog is obnoxious on leash? Do those characteristics negate all the positive ones or is it simply a matter of what you choose to focus on?

Aside from a shift in my own attitude, **I encouraged both children and our new pet to do what came naturally to them.** If there's one thing we can count on children to do, it's play. So I enlisted their help by having them play with Tina with wand and string toys, which would accomplish a few things: first, it would help to establish a bond between Tina and the kids. Second, it would, with all hope, increase Tina's confidence, and it would tap into her instinct to chase! And it worked! Then came the treats...



**When in doubt, count on food.** You can almost always rely on yummy treats to help you win over an animal. We were lucky that Tina did not have a picky palate and was quite content with *Temptations* treats. I had the kids toss them in her direction (as opposed to holding them in their hands). Soon enough, the positive association had been created and when Tina heard the kids she assumed one of two things: she was going to play or get yummy treats.

After several weeks, Tiny Tina found her place in our home. She rarely retreated under the bed, in part, because she had so many options for perching (another suggestion we make to adopters). Her favorite place became the ledge of the bay window.

Tina will probably always be my cat – which my husband endlessly teases me about – but it's something that I can treasure without any regret because she shows affection to everyone in the family now. And okay, maybe she shows everyone a little bit of sassiness too. ●

Stay tuned to hear how things went when we brought home a new dog!



## A Mischief of Rats

By Leesa Hanagan

Let's talk about rats! Some people think rats are gross. It's a common misconception that rats are mean and dirty little rodents. Maybe that's true of wild rats—an animal can only be as clean as the environment it lives in, and often that environment is full of danger, so a wild rat needs to be a tough little survivor!

Pet rats, though, are delightful little critters who are quite intelligent, empathetic, playful, clean and social. They can even laugh when tickled! When I talk to people here at the shelter who seem skeptical that rats could be good pets, I share that they are quite smart, like little dogs, and they are very easy to train. They are so clever and social, many rat owners let their rats free-range. A well-socialized pet rat knows where the treats come from so they will be front and center when it's playtime. Like dogs, they are optimistic opportunists—anything could be a delicious treat, so they will do just about whatever you want to get that reward.

A rat's favorite toy is: YOU! Sure, a rat will always love a nice big area full of other rats, toys, hammocks, snacks, and hidey boxes, but once you enter the room, they want to be with you. They want to inspect everything (even your teeth—those little *rodentists*), and once they are done playing on and exploring this huge human jungle gym, they'll settle in for a nap right on you. I once had a female rat that loved my husband so much that when he came into the room during free range time, she'd gently take his finger in her mouth and drag him over to her little blanket fort for safekeeping.

When a rat is happy, they will *brux* (grind their teeth). When a rat is in full bliss, they will brux so hard their eyes will bulge in and out very quickly, which is called a *boggle*. The first time a rat boggles at me, I feel like the luckiest person in the world. ●



### The FACTS ABOUT RATS

**Rat fact:** Rats cannot burp or throw up. So, no soda or peanut butter (choking hazard).

**Rat fact:** Male and female rats will urine mark in a new environment. A polite rat that urine marks on their human will give an apologetic look and clean it up right away.

**Rat fact:** Rats are empathic. They will figure out how to release their buddy if they are trapped, even if they are still kept separate from each other.

**Rat fact:** Those tails? While not fully prehensile, they do help with balance. They also help with regulating heat.

**Rat fact:** Rats are some of the most social rodents of all; because rats are so social, they need to be around other rats. Stick to rats of the same sex or have all members of one sex spayed or neutered.

*The Heat is On!*

**ADOPTION EVENT**  
**JUNE 22-25**  
**DOG ADOPTIONS: FEE-WAIVED!**  
**ALL OTHER ADOPTIONS: 50% OFF!**

FAIRFAX COUNTY  
ANIMAL  
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