

Texas Big Box Stray to Minnesota Family Cat

Mary Tan

I woke up bright and early that March day, exhausted after a long week of bringing puppies to area television stations at the crack of dawn. As the public relations manager at Animal Humane Society (AHS) in Minnesota's Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, I had pitched the idea of featuring adoptable puppies on morning news shows for National Puppy Day. Our local stations turned this event into a week long celebration, much to the delight of their audiences.

It was a rewarding week, but today was the day I was looking forward to. The American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) was funding a flight that would bring more than a hundred cats, several dozen dogs, and thirteen pigs to Minnesota from the Humane Society of North Texas in Fort Worth. The flight was organized by Wings of Rescue, a California nonprofit that flies homeless animals from states where shelters are overcrowded to communities with a greater capacity for adoption. My shelter would take in about half of the dogs and cats, and two other Minnesota rescue groups, Feline Rescue and Ruff Start Rescue, would take in the rest. The 150-pound pot-bellied pigs went to The Dubuque Humane Society in Iowa.

I got to the small airport an hour early, just in case the flight landed ahead of schedule. Soon staff and volunteers from the other animal rescue organizations arrived, along with a few members of the media I had invited. Everyone waited, eyes sparkling with excitement and anticipation.

The Wings of Rescue plane finally arrived and taxied to where we were waiting. It was a mid-sized cargo jet with just three seats – for the pilot, co-pilot, and a Wings of Rescue volunteer. The rest of the space was devoted to kennels and crates for animals who would soon find second chances in a new state.

As soon as the cargo door opened, the sights, sounds, and smells of the animals filled the air. The dogs barked with excitement while the cats and kittens meowed at the unknown. The animals were safely housed in kennels of various sizes – big dogs and pigs in huge crates while petite cats sat cozily in small carriers. There were multiple momma cats with their tiny mewling kittens in tow, each family in its own crate.

Nearly twenty of us there to help unload the plane whooped with joy and enthusiasm at the first glimpse of those furry faces. It was an emotional high for everyone. After the exuberance subsided, we worked quickly to get the animals unloaded. That night, with great satisfaction to everyone involved, the Texas cats, dogs, and pigs spent their first night in the Midwest — safe and sound in their new shelters and foster homes.

I went to bed early that night, but I couldn't fall asleep even though I was exhausted. I picked up my phone and started watching local news coverage of the event. Then on a whim of curiosity, I went on Facebook to read what the Humane Society of North Texas had posted about the event from their end. That's when I stumbled upon the emotional posts Texas foster families had written about the animals they'd been caring for who just arrived in Minnesota. They knew the animals were going to a good place, but it didn't make saying goodbye any easier. They missed their cats and dogs dearly. I quickly posted a message saying that the animals had arrived safely in Minnesota.

Within moments, I received a direct message from Jessica Tovar, a foster volunteer who had put a momma cat and her babies on the flight:

Mary,

I work at a home improvement store in Fort Worth where I rescued a momma cat named Checkers along with her babies. The night manager at my job wanted them put down. I was not going to allow that to happen and took them home. Fortunately, my husband and I had recently moved into our first house and had space to foster them, with the help of the Humane Society of North Texas. After we took them in we were able to litter box train them and get them comfortable with humans. We wanted to keep them, but we already have four cats. Giving them up to the

shelter after getting close to them was the hardest thing. After lots of tears, we surrendered them, but we can't stop feeling sad. I don't think I'll be able to forget the look Checkers gave me as I drove her and her kittens to the shelter. I feel as if she thought we were going to be her new family. I would like to know how she is doing. As I'm writing this I'm bawling my eyes out wondering if they are scared or doing ok.

My mind started racing. Which momma was Checkers? I remembered seeing a few sets of feline families earlier that day. Then the emotional thought of giving up a little family like this hit me. I would be in tears too if I were in the same situation, so I wrote Jessica back immediately saying I would try to honor her request and provide an update on Checkers and her kittens. We continued messaging each other into the wee hours of the night, and I got more information about Checkers.

The next morning, I got to work early to inquire about Checkers. I was excited to learn that she and her babies were delivered safely to AHS. I ran downstairs to check on the sweet family. The Tortoiseshell feline and her kittens were resting contentedly. The babies' paws twitched and mouths gently open and closed as they dreamed. I didn't want to wake them so I quietly snapped some photos.

As I stopped to look at the sleeping momma, Checkers must have sensed I was there as she opened her eyes. I quietly opened the cage door and

gave her some pets as her young kittens slept. I couldn't believe this tiny girl was living in a home improvement store in Texas up until a few weeks ago. I gave her some chin scratches and then sent the photos off to Jessica.

Checkers was born in July of 2017 with her sister Pinwheel (Penny) and brother Butters. The three lived in the outdoor garden center of a huge home improvement store in Fort Worth, where college students Jessica Tovar and Jocelyn Rodriguez Ramirez worked part-time. Jessica and Jocelyn shared a love of cats and took it upon themselves to care for the furry threesome with the help of a few other co-workers. This litter was standoffish at first, but soon Penny and Butters became comfortable with people. Butters was so affectionate that he began to sit at the counter as people checked out, and returning customers knew him by name. Butters eventually went home with an employee. Penny, who is now spayed, still lives at the store where she can often be found reclining on lawn bags.

Checkers was a different story. She was wary of people and would run away if anyone got too close. Jocelyn and Jessica worked in the garden center where Checkers spent most of her time. They spent time during each shift working to tame and socialize Checkers.

Their efforts paid off. Soon the young kitty was following them everywhere! When Jocelyn was transferred to another area of the store, she continued to visit Checkers and bring her treats. In the summer of 2018, Checkers figured out how to activate the motion sensors on the store's automatic sliding doors so she could come in and escape the sizzling Texas heat. From that point on the wayward cat became Jocelyn's shadow, following her inside the store and throughout the electrical department, demanding pets and belly rubs while Jocelyn restocked light bulbs and extension cords.

Mundane work activities became more entertaining with Checkers. Jocelyn gave her boxes to play and nap in. One day she entertained Checkers by folding electrical tape together and cutting fringe into it. Jocelyn dangled it in front of Checkers and suddenly got to see the carefree side of this cat. From that point on, Jocelyn attached the dangling electrical tape to her cart so Checkers would always follow.

Customers would often be surprised to see Checkers at the busy warehouse store. It was such a rough place for a shy kitty to be playful. Checkers still didn't trust strangers, and Jocelyn often warned customers the cat might scratch them if they were too forward with her.

In December of 2018, store employees noticed the Tortoiseshell kitty was gaining weight. It soon became clear she was pregnant. The store's

managers had already threatened to throw the resident felines out of the store. News of a new litter would not be taken well, and Jocelyn and Jessica feared for the worst since they had struggled to place past litters of kittens.

On February 8, 2019, Checkers gave birth to four kittens at the store. At first, Jessica and Jocelyn couldn't find the babies. After looking high and low all over the store, they found them secluded in flower pots outside the garden center. The healthy kittens grew and began to venture out on their own. That's when management found them and told the employees the kittens were to be euthanized.

Upon hearing this, Jessica vowed to protect these newborn babies and went to look for them. They were not by the flower pots as they usually were. She searched and searched and found the kittens alone next to the store's trash compactor. She grabbed them and took them home that day.

Jessica knew she couldn't separate the kittens from their mother. She called Jocelyn and the two devised a plan to trap the wayward momma. Expecting a long night, they prepared a large crate with plenty of blankets, treats, and wet, delicious cat food. They went to the store with gear in tow and set it down next to the outside garden registers where Checkers often would hang out. Much to their shock, the Tortie walked

into the crate within minutes! Both Jessica and Jocelyn laughed at their extensive preparation for what turned out to be a relatively easy task.

Checkers and her kittens were reunited at Jessica's house that day, and momma was thrilled to see her babies. But now they had a new challenge: neither of them had the resources to care for five cats. They decided to reach out to local animal organizations for help.

That afternoon Jocelyn and Jessica went to the Humane Society of North Texas to see if Checkers and her babies could be rehomed through them. They brought the happy family along, hoping for the best.

Staff at the Texas shelter sadly explained that, due to limited space, they had to prioritize animals who would make great house pets. If Checkers was feral, she and her kittens would have to be euthanized. The two cat rescuers knew they couldn't let that happen. They went back to their car and immediately started calling every animal rescue organization in the area.

A few minutes later, the same staff member came out to their car and told them there might be another option. There was going to be a flight where more than a hundred animals would go to less crowded shelters in Minnesota. If Checkers was a good candidate for the flight, she and her babies could find loving homes 940 miles to the north.

Jessica and Jocelyn went back inside with Checkers and her litter in tow. During the exam, Checkers was on her best behavior. It seemed like the young Tortie knew she needed to be perfectly behaved to save herself and her kittens. Shelter staff agreed the sweet momma cat and kittens were fit for the trip, but it wasn't for another week. Jessica and Jocelyn agreed to care for the family until then, thrilled they could have a little more time with their favorite kitties.

The next week went quickly. Jessica and Jocelyn took shifts spending time with Checkers and the babies. Jessica was with them in the morning and Jocelyn would visit in the afternoon. The kittens grew steadily and Checkers was becoming more and more friendly. They were also relieved Checkers used the litter box on a regular basis.

Finally, the day before the flight, Jocelyn spent her final afternoon with Checkers. Jocelyn cried and explained to the little feline family that they were loved, valued, and would be deeply missed. She also felt anxious knowing that there were no guarantees the future shelter would not euthanize her for being too feral. Jocelyn knew she had no choice but to hope for the best. She said one last prayer, reassured the animals, said goodbye, and cried the rest of the way home.

The next day Jessica had the difficult duty of taking Checkers and the kittens to the shelter for their flight to Minnesota. She too found the good-bye emotionally unbearable. Jessica told me that at one point Checkers put her paw on her arm and gave a look as if to say: “Why are you abandoning us?” It was too much and Jessica broke into tears yet again. After their final good-bye, Jessica left full of sadness, yet hopeful for Checkers and her babies.

After their arrival at my shelter, I paid particular attention to Checkers, visiting her and the babies in their kennel every day. I felt it was my duty to watch over them for Jessica and Jocelyn. Eventually, our veterinary staff determined the kittens were officially weaned. Checkers would make her debut in our adoption center while the kittens went to a foster home until they were big enough to be spayed or neutered.

After the kittens went to a foster volunteer, Checkers was placed in one of our colony rooms, a large space where adopters can interact and play with available felines. Checkers loved to climb the cat trees in the room and cuddle with the other kitties, but her stay would be very temporary. Within a few days, the Green family came to the shelter in search of the perfect cat. Susan Green, along with her granddaughters Natalie and Ellie, had recently lost a feline due to illness. They decided it was time to look for a new companion for their remaining kitty, Teddy.

Susan's ten-year-old old granddaughter Ellie led the search, playing and looking at every cat she could see and touch. From a distance, she spotted Checkers sitting on a ledge in her colony room. The little girl walked into the room, gave the kitty a look-over, and proclaimed, "Grandma, that's the one. You have to have her." The three visited with Checkers in a private room and Susan agreed, "Yes, she's the one."

Safe and loved in her new home, Checkers has blossomed into the perfect cat. She loves to curl up with Teddy and has favorite spots on the Green family's comfy furniture. Her kittens quickly found new homes, too. Being so cute, almost all were adopted the same day they were put on the adoption floor.

Back in Texas, Jocelyn graduated from college and is pursuing a career in finance. Jessica is still in school and hopes to become an accountant in the near future. Both say they'll continue their work helping felines, fostering stray cats and any kittens who come their way.

Checkers is just one of thousands of cats my animal shelter takes in each year. I am so proud we not only help cats in Minnesota, but cats in communities across the nation through animal transport. Long ago I realized only people can make life better for animals. I am thankful for Jessica and Jocelyn and countless others who work together, near and

far, to help these animals. Together we can make sure every animal is loved and cared for.