

How Blue Bell Became My Sanctuary: A Volunteer's Journey with Senior Cats



A note from Gale Kennel

The heavens parted, and angels sang as I walked into Blue Bell for the first time on November 29, 2022.

Too dramatic? Let me back up.

I grew up in Orange County with cats in our household—sometimes just one, sometimes in pairs. Juliet, Max, Cleo, and a big, lovable Maine Coon named Melvin, whose nickname was “The Bus” because of his enormous size. However, my husband of almost 42 years has severe allergies, so cats were never a part of our adult life together. But five years ago, when my daughter and her now-husband got their first cat, it reawakened a love for cats that had long been dormant. I needed to spend time with cats! But how could I fulfill this longing?

One day, my neighbor casually mentioned that she had a friend who volunteers at "some cat place in Laguna, maybe?" How could I not know about this place? I've driven down Laguna Canyon Road thousands of times, and I don't recall seeing anything about cats. Within seconds, I fired off an email to Blue Bell, asking about volunteering there. I was thrilled when I received a quick reply, followed by a phone call with Jenna Mikula, the director. We set up an orientation, and I was beyond excited!

I will never forget my first time walking into the Anderson Wentzel House for my orientation. My actual thought was: "Oh my gosh, THERE ARE CATS HERE!" Well, of course there are. But it's like the Eiffel Tower—you see pictures, hear about it, and watch movies, but when you finally experience it yourself, it takes your breath away. That's how cats are to me.

How could Blue Bell be real? I get to sit with cats, and I don't even have to pay for it? (Though I totally would.)



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The Bertha Yergat Cottage was even better. I sat on a bench while Jenna sat across from me and told me about the foundation, its rules, and what to keep in mind during my shifts. But I had so much trouble concentrating on what she was saying because a cat named Chica climbed into my lap and settled in for a snooze. What is happening here? Do I really get to just sit here and pet this cat?

Once the orientation was over, I stayed to meet the other residents, most of whom were sleeping. I walked into the buffer room and met the first love of my Blue Bell life—Gideon. He groomed me, head-butted me, walked all around me, and my heart melted into a puddle. I like to say that Gideon was my favorite "hat" because he would climb onto the mantle above the bench and drape himself over my head. We may have both fallen asleep once or twice in that position during some of my shifts.

What sets the Blue Bell cats apart is that they were once people's beloved companions. Their owners were willing to spend money to ensure their cats would have a permanent, loving home to live out their days. The bond between human and cat can be incredibly strong, and I am humbled and grateful when a cat chooses my lap to sit on. I never take that time for granted. Both of us benefit so much from the time spent together. I consider it my therapy. I get quiet time with a warm, loving, purring animal whose mere presence calms my body and spirit. I went from one shift—or "therapy session"—a week to three. Sometimes, I even showed up on extra days just because I missed the cats.



I know the cats benefit too, especially when they get so comfortable and relaxed that their head starts to droop, and they quietly nod off. (I'll never forget the time Claude fell asleep on me and left a little heart-shaped drool mark on my pants.) Human attention and compassion make a huge difference in their lives. These cats are suddenly missing their owners and their familiar homes. Some of them are terrified at first, but just look at a resident like Billy to see the difference the volunteers make. When he first arrived, you wouldn't have known he was in the isolation room unless the sign on his door told you. Once visitors were allowed, I went in and found him hiding under a small set of stairs.

That sweet face melted me right then and there, and I promised him we'd be friends. He took his time warming up, but he's a different cat now. He recently charmed a whole group of visiting Girl Scouts, who showered him with love. He sat between them on the floor, soaking up all the attention. I love that boy!

And it's not just the two houses—the gardens are a beautiful display of native plants, flowers, benches, fountains, and places to explore.

How can you not smile when you see Jambo in his harness, going for a walk among the paths and exploring to his Bengal heart's content? The gardens have also played a poignant role in the lives of some of our cats. I will be forever grateful to Jenna for sending me a text when Gideon's health was failing and his time to cross the rainbow bridge had come. She knew we had a special bond, and she thought I would want to come to spend some time together and say goodbye.

We took him outside and let him explore the gardens. He let us know when he was done and wanted to go back inside. Once inside, he went straight into the rainbow play tunnel and laid down, something I'd never seen him do before. The symbol of that rainbow wasn't lost on me. I got to kiss him goodbye as Joyce carried him out that day.

The heartbreak is still so strong. How do we bear it without falling apart constantly? Because another day, some sweet face will look at you, give you a slow blink, and that's it. The love lives on.

The success stories at Blue Bell are endless. The cats thrive, and so do the people. Blue Eyes has blossomed in the last year, and now gladly lets herself be



brushed—not that she needs the extra grooming; she's a gorgeous girl.

Haggis, that little chicken nugget, has gone from a shy, hiding boy to the overly-confident orange stalker we all know and love!

The list goes on, but the story is the same: the cats and the people need each other. We all benefit from sharing our company.

My time as a Blue Bell volunteer is coming to a close. I am moving to Oregon to be closer to my daughter, son-in-law, and their two crazy orange cats. It's such a bittersweet moment, but volunteering here has truly changed my life. It has given me purpose and passion, and I'm already researching opportunities to further expand my role in the lives of cats who need it most.

I will forever be grateful to Blue Bell for filling the cat-shaped hole in my heart. I may not own a cat, but I couldn't love these babies any more than if they were mine. (They may be seniors, but they will always remain my babies.)

