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Snooki is in attack mode.

Known for her drama queen personality and anger management issues, Snooki is a furry calico feline.

“She doesn’t play well with others,” explains Nicole West, cat rescue coordinator for the Shelter Animal Resources Alliance, or SARA.

Snooki is part of a recently expanded pool of cats with special medical conditions or temperament issues, who were in danger of being euthanized before being taken in by the nonprofit alliance.

The alliance, on River Road in west Eugene, has a mission of rescuing, advocating for and assisting shelter animals. The agency operates an adjoining thrift and gift store, SARA’s Treasures, and has roughly doubled the number of cats taken in during recent months. It’s also seen a recent physical expansion, leaving more space for its now cat-centric mission.

As the Christmas season approaches, the group also has expanded its holiday-themed fundraising outreach, in an attempt to respond to the growth in services.

Since its founding in January 2001, SARA has rescued at least 960 dogs and more than 800 cats that it says might otherwise have been put down by veterinary services, animal shelters and animal control centers. The alliance houses the animals at its store until they’re able to be placed in permanent homes.

The organization stopped accepting dogs in 2008, with the loss of its dog rescue coordinator.

On Aug. 1, SARA’s Treasures took over the adjacent space to the thrift store, vacated about a year earlier by River Road Sewing and Vacuum Repair, for a lease of \$1,350 per month.

That acquisition led to a series of renovations, including knocking out black mold in the bathroom, and repairing and in some places replacing chipped wood board and chipped tile.

“It took a full month,” Executive Director Melinda McCormick said.

After the renovations, SARA’s Treasures slowly added a gift shop to the recently renovated space, opening it to the public on Oct. 3.

The store moved its holiday thrift items and books to the new side of the store, and has added product lines, including Animal Supply and other pet supply brand names.

“We’d never had (so much) space before,” McCormick said.

The addition has freed up more room for the focal point of the agency’s business: rescuing cats.

In the past few years, cat capacity has hovered around 10 at a time as the shelter attempted to place the animals in homes. Currently, however, the thrift and gift store is home to 21 cats, and West says they intend to keep the number at around 20.

Even as the number of animals helped has grown, SARA is narrowing its focus to cats with disorders and medical needs. McCormick says it’s that group of felines that is at greater risk of euthanasia at larger animal shelters.

“We see a lot of different health conditions,” McCormick said.

Each cat is given a basic health check, tested for diseases and parasites, spayed and neutered, and vaccinated upon arriving at SARA. The cost of such services are covered through community donations, fundraisers and store revenue.

Before accepting an adoption application, the organization requires an interview with potential pet owners, educating them about any special conditions that an animal may have.

Every animal adopted through SARA comes with a “lifetime cat return policy,” meaning if a family or person who took in a cat can no longer take care of it, SARA will take the animal back and find a new home.

One cat, currently housed in a room behind the main thrift store, is 11-year-old Dahlia. She was previously owned by the owner of an automotive shop prior to being rescued by SARA.

Dahlia had a number of health complications, as she was covered with antifreeze from her life in the auto shop. She also was missing hair in the back half of her body due to over-grooming, and she used to have fleas.

Since taking her in, SARA has eradicated the flea issue and treated her antifreeze-related health issues.

“We’re trying to give her a good home,” said West.

Other cats currently in the group’s possession include Creamsicle, an obese cat who was originally force-fed with a syringe; Saul and Bob, two scrawny white and black cats that are HIV-positive; and Tancy, a blind cat.

After the Greenhill Humane Society took over the First Avenue Shelter, previously run by Lane County, SARA stopped collaborating with the shelter, reducing the pool of resources from which at-risk animals could be rescued. Around that time, a number of pet organizations, including a group called No Kill Lane County, were expressing concerns about Greenhill's euthanasia policies and reassessing their relationships with the agency.

The last animals SARA took from the First Avenue Shelter were two cats with ringworm in 2012. Currently, however, SARA still works with seven rescue partners, as well as with the Community Veterinary Center in west Eugene and several other veterinarians.

In recent years, SARA has operated on an annual budget of between \$230,000 and \$300,000. The store operates with the help of about 12 active volunteers, a number which increased by four with the recent addition of space.

In the previous fiscal year of 2013-14, the alliance saw expenses outpace revenues by more than \$80,000. McCormick said that's partly because of an increased demand for its services.

It's also why SARA is busy trying to garner support during the holiday season.

The alliance has 18 Giving Tree locations supporting its work in Eugene and Springfield, including all 12 Mini Pet Marts, two dog washes, a veterinary hospital and three eateries. The full list appears on the agency's website.

While McCormick is unsure what the Christmas season will bring, she and West are decisive about their intent to keep providing services to the community's less-fortunate cats.

"We want to help out as much as we can," McCormick said.

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SHELTER ANIMAL RESOURCES ALLIANCE (SARA)

Gift and thrift store

Where: 871 River Road, Eugene

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily

