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HAWAII NEWS

Animal lover seeks compassion for cats

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COURTESY LANAI CAT SANCTUARY

Keoni Vaughn, former vice president and director of operations at the Hawaiian Humane Society in Honolulu, is executive director of Lanai Cat Sanctuary a few years ago, with 600 cats under his care in a 30,000-square-foot open-air facility.

A honeymoon and first-time trip to Lanai a few years ago led Keoni Vaughn to his current mission — to save both the native birds and homeless cats on the remote island.

Vaughn is the executive director of the Lanai Cat Sanctuary, a nonprofit dedicated to the care of stray felines. He has about 600 cats under his care, and hopes to expand and take in more. But he also sees his mission as bringing two sides of the community together to find solutions.

"I always knew conservationists, or bird lovers, and cat lovers really didn't see eye to eye," said Vaughn. "I love solving problems and I love collaborating. I figured if there's any place in this world where we can come up with a humane society, it's gotta be Lanai."

So three years ago, Vaughn left his position as vice president and director of operations at the Hawaiian Humane Society in Honolulu to become executive director of the cat sanctuary — with no electricity or access to the internet and a staff of just six. The facility is about a mile from the airport.

LANAI CAT SANCTUARY

>> **Hours:** 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. daily

>> **Info:** Visit lanaicatsanctuary.org

When he first landed on Lanai, Vaughn was struck by what he called a "pristine paradise." He had an epiphany during a hike to Puu Pehe, or Sweetheart Rock, between Manele and Hulopoe bays, where he saw vulnerable, nesting wedge-tailed shearwaters that were basically a buffet for feral cats.

Upon discovering the sanctuary, founded by Lanai resident Kathy Carroll, it seemed like a calling.

The idea is to provide a humane solution for the cats while keeping them away from the native and endangered birds, a win-win solution that Vaughn feels is possible for every island.

Challenges include the island's remoteness. Roughly 75 pounds of cat food a day has to be shipped in on a barge, requiring careful planning.

But the open-air sanctuary has thrived under Vaughn's leadership. It now offers 30,000 square feet of fenced-in space, with plenty of places for the felines to nestle, sleep and play, as well as a "Catfurgeria." It takes in an average of 200 residents a year, accepting only cats from Lanai.

Vaughn established a visiting veterinarian program with Dr. Eric Ako from The Pet Doctor on Oahu, who arrives on the first and third Wednesdays of every month to offer services through a mobile van. Every cat at the sanctuary has a name and microchip and is spayed and neutered. Every cat is also available for adoption.

With growing media exposure, the cat sanctuary has become a popular tourist attraction. It once drew about 800 visitors a year, but now attracts more than 8,000 visitors annually from Japan, Canada and the mainland. One couple even got married there.

The sanctuary is actually the No. 1-ranked activity on TripAdvisor. There is no admission fee, but donations are welcome and come mostly from off-island visitors, who are also the ones most likely to adopt. Last year, 54 cats were adopted out.

“For the past few years, I’ve watched him tackle this with vision and purpose,” said Vaughn’s wife, Jacque Vaughn, who nominated him for Hero Next Door recognition. “With all the odds against success, he’s brought hope and light to an issue that seems impossible. He’s dared naysayers to witness the work and turned adversaries into friends. His belief in possibilities and creative collaboration is so strong that it’s contagious.”

Vaughn, 45, was born and raised in Waimanalo and always had a love for animals.

Following an early career as a professional dog handler, he got his start at the Hawaiian Humane Society as an animal investigator. As chief investigator, he handled cat-hoarding and cruelty cases, including that of a puppy mill in Waimanalo. As director of operations, he mediated many problems related to cats.

“That’s when I started falling in love with cats,” he said. “I love all animals, but I felt like cats had a special and unique place in Hawaii.”

The father of 2-year-old son Hunter spends his weeks going back and forth between Oahu and Lanai. The family also has two cats rescued from the streets at home in Honolulu — Sly and Skitzabell.

“I just personally feel Hawaii has a long way to go to cultivate compassion for cats,” said Vaughn. “I think Lanai could serve as a potential model of finding that humane solution to the cat and bird issue.”

We recently asked readers to help shine a light on the good works of a few true unsung heroes. Readers responded with nominees from divergent walks of island life who share a common desire to help others. Star-Advertiser editors chose five Heroes Next Door. This is the last article for the year.

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