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**The New York Times** <http://nyti.ms/20Fvl3C>

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N.Y. / REGION

# Where the Abused, and Their Pets, Can Be Safe

Pet City

By ANDY NEWMAN    APRIL 14, 2016

Ms. H decided she had to move out of her mother's apartment last spring after her drug-addicted sister held a knife to her throat and threatened to kill her.

She packed up her stuff and her 6-year-old son and called a domestic violence hotline.

When the hotline worker asked if she had a safe place to leave her cat, Ms. H froze.

"My mother is telling me, 'If you say you have to bring the cat with you, they're going to say no,'" Ms. H said.

Until very recently, pet owners who were abused invariably had to choose between staying with their abusers or leaving without their pets, because virtually no domestic violence shelters allowed pets.

This bind can prove disastrous: Abusers use pets to control their victims. In 2014, a woman in Queens was choked and stomped to death by her boyfriend after she went home to protect her dog. In January, a man in Queens was charged with killing his girlfriend's dog after she said she was leaving.

More than two-thirds of battered women in one survey said their abusers had

harmed or threatened their pets.

But there is a growing understanding of how pets become pawns in the cycle of domestic violence.

There are now about two dozen shelters nationwide that let pets live with residents, advocates say, and about 100 more that provide on-site kennels — still just a fraction of the total.

In 2013, a nonprofit called the Urban Resource Institute opened the first shelter in New York City that lets domestic violence victims live with their pets. “Pets are members of the family, and no one, especially victims of domestic violence, should have to make the impossible decision to leave their pets behind during times of crisis,” said Nathaniel Fields, the organization’s president.

But the institute has only 27 apartments in its program, called UriPals (for People and Animals Living Safely). The units are the only animal-friendly housing in a citywide domestic violence shelter system that serves about 9,000 people a year.

And when Ms. H (the name she and the shelter officials requested be used to protect her anonymity because she is a victim of domestic violence) and her son moved into the U.R.I. shelter in Brooklyn last May, there were no vacancies for pets. So the cat stayed behind at the apartment of Ms. H’s mother in Manhattan, where Ms. H had sought refuge from an abusive boyfriend.

It was a bad situation. Ms. H’s sister, the cat’s original owner, had long since stopped taking care of her. The cat herself had gone from sweet pet to nasty recluse, hiding most of the time and lashing out with her claws when approached.

After Ms. H left, things got worse. Her sister pulled a knife on her mother and was briefly jailed. Her mother fled to the Dominican Republic. Another sister came by once a day to feed the cat.

Then Ms. H got a phone call from a man to whom her sister apparently owed money.

“He said, ‘We don’t see you here, but we know how to hurt you, and if you don’t let her come back to us you’re going to pay for it,’” she said. “I thought ‘Oh, my God, they’re going to go into the apartment, they’re going to kill my cat.’”

A couple of days later, Ms. H, an effusive woman in her 30s who worked as a coordinator for a health-benefits company, went to check on the cat (whom she referred to as Midnight in an interview for this article). The apartment was padlocked. She got the police to let her in. The place had been trashed. Furniture was overturned. Doors were broken down.

“I call her — ‘Midnight! Midnight!’ Nothing,” she said.

Ms. H was devastated. But three days later, she found her cat at the city animal shelter in East Harlem. “As I’m turning around, all I hear is ‘Meow, meow, meow.’ She hears me!”

After boarding with the Mayor’s Alliance for NYC’s Animals, the cat was finally able to join Ms. H and her son in July in a spacious, sunny suite in the same institute shelter behind a door that says “Pet Friendly Apartment.”

In a safe, stable environment, it is not just Ms. H who has found a new life. The cat has, too.

Last summer, Ms. H’s father died, and she was surprised to find the slinky black cat who had kept her distance coming out to comfort her. “When I rested on the couch, she came and put her head on my thigh,” Ms. H said. “She looked up at me, like she was saying, ‘It’s O.K.’ This cat was taking care of me.”

One afternoon last month, Ms. H led a visitor into her apartment. “Ooh, baby, Mommy’s here!” she called. The cat was curled up on the bed. Ms. H scooped her up. “She’s so sweet.” The cat ate a few treats from her hand.

Since UriPals started, it has housed more than 40 families and over 60 pets, mostly cats and dogs but also turtles. There is a dog run in the back, built with a grant from Purina.

“When you’re living in a domestic violence shelter it can be complicated when you walk your dog,” said Abby Tuller, senior director of domestic violence programs for the institute. “You meet other people with dogs on the street and they say, ‘Oh, you’re new to the community, when did you move here, where do you live?’ We wanted to give people a place where they could be outside with their dog but within our security.”

Jasmin Rivera, a former college history instructor, spent nearly two years at the Brooklyn shelter after fleeing a partner who broke her ankle in the course of a two-hour

assault witnessed by her two terrified Shih Tzus.

“I needed a place where I could heal and the dogs could heal,” said Ms. Rivera, 41. “They showed me the dog park and all the help they give you, and I said, ‘Oh, my God, this is everything I need.’ Because it’s not just me that went through it. My dogs went through it, too.”

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A version of this article appears in print on April 17, 2016, on page MB2 of the New York edition with the headline: Haven From Abuse, for Animals, Too.

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