

Caring in Action: Comfort for Critters knits together love of crafting, animals



Linda Kastiel Kozlowski of Glen Ellyn sits with her dog Biscuit as she knits a blanket for the organization she started, Comfort for Critters. (Courtesy of Linda Kastiel Kozlowski)

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A few years ago, Linda Kastiel Kozlowski of Glen Ellyn was at the DuPage County Animal Shelter to adopt a kitten. She was thrilled to pick out her new pet, but something was nagging at her. "I thought to myself, 'What do I do with all the other eyes looking at me?'"

She couldn't help but notice their cold cages with just a towel on the floor to make them comfortable. "I like to crochet, so I figured I could crochet them blankets for their cages," Kozlowski said. "It was like God tapping me on the shoulder saying this is your thing."

Kozlowski, who has two boys, said she was always at a game or practice and used her time there to make a blanket a week. "People started coming up to me saying how many scarves can you crochet?" When she told them what she was actually making, she received positive feedback, and other crafty minds asked if they could help too.

So, she started a website in 2009, comfortforcritters.org, where people could find out how to volunteer and where to send their



Anna at the DuPage Animal Control Shelter in Wheaton gets all cozy with her blanket from Comfort for Critters. (Courtesy of Linda Kastiel Kozlowski)

creations. "It was a sign that when you follow your passion, it can really take off," Kozlowski said. And take off it did. Kozlowski has volunteers in towns in and around DuPage County, as well as across the country. "Crafters and animal lovers are really passionate people," Kozlowski said. "This brings the two passions together."

Last year, volunteers donated 20,000 blankets, which are shipped to every state in the U.S. Kozlowski said she has a more than 100 volunteers every month, and about 1,000 total who help.

"It still blows my mind how many people want to help," she said. Kozlowski said volunteers can drop off their donations to their local shelters, or send them to her and she will drop them off or ship them

to where they need to go. Shipping costs have gone up, Kozlowski said, and that is where any monetary donations go.

Right now, though, she said her biggest need is more yarn. Kozlowski said she is down to only a few boxes of yarn in her attic. Local volunteers can pick up yarn from a bench outside her house whenever they need some. That's where yarn donations can also be dropped off. "It doesn't matter what you have, little skeins, partial, what colors you have, we take it all and use it," Kozlowski said. The bench is also where volunteers can drop off their blankets in bags. Just make sure to leave a note with your name and where you want your donation to go. Each person who donates gets a thank-you card from Kozlowski. For more information on how to donate, visit the website.

Kozlowski said anyone can make blankets, from little kids to seniors. And she said volunteers tell her what a blessing it is to be able to give back, especially during the pandemic. "People tell me all the time that to be able to pick up the needles and make a blanket to help someone else helps with their mental state," she said. She said she receives letters from people with brain injuries who say the constant repetition and counting stitches helps them. Or people who are trying to lose weight or stop smoking say it gives them something to do with their hands.

But the real blessing is seeing the shelter animals with those handmade blankets lining their cages. Kozlowski says that when she works with a

shelter, she gets them to commit to letting the animals take the blanket with them when they are adopted. Kozlowski said the animals bond with the blankets and it becomes a comfort to them. It relaxes them as they travel to the vet or meet potential adopters. And it helps with adoptions as well.

How the blankets help

"The blankets make it look like they are someone's pet and not just a stray," Kozlowski said. Kathy Macdiarmid of Lisle agrees. She is on the board of the Animal Rescue Foundation, which has cat centers in Darien and Wheaton. It also fosters dogs. "Our cat centers look warm and cozy.



Shadow from Rover Rescue in North Aurora sits on his blanket made by volunteers with Comfort for Critters. - Courtesy of Linda Kastiel Kozlowski



Boxes full of blankets with thank you notes for shelter workers are ready to go out. - Courtesy of Linda Kastiel Kozlowski



The bench outside Linda Kastiel Kozlowski's house in Glen Ellyn has extra yarn for volunteers to pick up to make blankets for Comfort for Critters. Volunteers can also drop off their blankets in the bench. - Courtesy of Linda Kastiel Kozlowski



Chaz from Almost Home in Elk Grove Village with a blanket made by volunteers with Comfort for Critters. - Courtesy of Linda Kastiel Kozlowski

People walk by and see the blankets instead of newspapers or nothing," she said. Macdiarmid said she found out about Kozlowski from reading a newspaper article and called to have her rescue added to the list. From there, blankets were delivered about once a month.

Now, ARF has two sisters who make the blankets and deliver them. Linda and Pat Rychtarik, both of Lisle, work at JoAnn Fabrics and met a Comfort for Critters volunteer there. "They supply the blankets," Macdiarmid said of the sisters. "They recently delivered 30 cat blankets and 10 dog blankets."

Macdiarmid said the organization has made a world of difference for the animals she takes care of. "It's nice for them to have something they can take home with them that has their smell. It brings them comfort when they are stressed."

And she can't say enough good things about Kozlowski and her volunteers. "She is awesome, so generous. Linda knows we are taken care of and always says just let us know what you need."

That's how Micheal Incopero feels as well. He is a volunteer with Safe Haven Dog Rescue. Based in St. Charles, the organization works to save dogs in high-kill shelters in Tennessee and places them in foster homes around the area, including Elmhurst, Elgin, Aurora and even as far west as Dekalb.

Incopero said he found out about Comfort for Critters from his sister, who along with his niece, makes blankets. "I had never really heard of them," he said. "It is an organization that flies under the radar, but they are very quick to respond. If I tell them I have a transport coming, I will have blankets the next day."



Linda Kastiel Kozlowski of Glen Ellyn with a stack of blankets dropped off by one volunteer for Comfort for Critters. - Courtesy of Linda Kastiel Kozlowski



It's not just cats and dogs that get the blankets from Comfort for Critters. Here, a bunny from House Rabbit Society of Chicago in Westchester snuggles with a blanket. - Courtesy of Linda Kastiel Kozlowski

Incopero says the dogs he takes in are stressed. They have come from a place where they see a person once a day, living on concrete floors. They have lived terrible, abusive lives and have nothing familiar to them. The blankets are put in the crates and travel with the dog. It becomes something they are extremely attached to and decreases their stress levels.

"These blankets are a godsend. They are a fantastic help," Incopero said. "It is the best part of America, local people taking care of problems. The volunteers who do this, they do all the knitting, but they don't get to see the joy it brings. They don't get to see the end result. "

Kozlowski said she tries to put photos of the animals with their blankets on her website so people can understand the impact they are making. "I did not anticipate this happening,"

Kozlowski said of her organization. "I just thought I was making blankets. But it has turned into a blessing for people who get involved and the animals."

Comfort for Critters

Comfort for Critters is in need of yarn donations. To find out how to donate, or to become a volunteer, visit comfortforcritters.org. There, you can also find a list of shelters across the country the organization supports, as well as free patterns for blankets and how to make monetary donations.