

The story of Riley: this feral cat taught and learned the gift of acceptance

Written by Jean Bartlett, May, 2018

Psychologists have noted that so often a nickname is a term of endearment, a soft call of affection for those we love. Riley, a dapper grey feline, cautious yet strong, was originally given his name by volunteers with the Homeless Cat Network of San Mateo County. When his family, Cindy and Alex, adopted him, they kept his name. "It suited him." But as evidenced by the words Cindy wrote on a Facebook posting, following Riley's death on March 15, 2018, the multi-nicknamed Riley will forever reign in the arms of the endeared.

A mind of his own, pensive, aloof, a love bug when it was on his terms – a cat's cat – that was our Riley. He loved his brother Mickey – snuggled close, sometimes a little too close. He enjoyed many spots in the house from high atop his cat tree to snoozing down in his bean bag. He was agile and sleek, trotting like a gray fox through the halls and rooms. Catnip, oh catnip -- what joy it brought to the fun of the cat scratcher, even to the day before last. He was observant, staying close, but not too close. Belly rubs and pets were a delight for us all, when he came to ask for them, we complied. He was an alarm cat extraordinaire; a little walking around on top of us, a little sitting on top of me, patiently waiting for pets and breakfast.

Riley Wiley, Riley Aloysius, Rile-a-Roo, Riles – he left us on Thursday, March 15. After nearly 10 years, when I had never been able to pick him up, he succumbed to me doing so, soothing him with pets as best we could, and then he passed. Too soon, not quite 11. We miss him very much and always will.



"Nearly 10 years ago, Alex and I were looking to adopt a cat through the Homeless Cat Network," Cindy said. "We had seen a long-haired, grey cat named Tima online. Tima was an amazing, ginormous very sweet cat. We knew that Tima was meant for us and then there was Riley, sitting on a separate cat tree looking at us. He just pulled at our heart strings and Alex was really drawn to Riley."

"He had such a cute face," Alex said.

While the two feral cats were not brothers, they had been cared for together in a foster home and thought of each other as family. Both cats came home with Cindy and Alex.

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Companion Best Friends

The story of Riley: this feral cat taught and learned the gift of acceptance (page 2)

"Both were very shy," Cindy recalled. "Tima was more friendly, so we could interact a little more with him. But it was very clear the day we brought Riley home, that Alex was Riley's person."

"I don't know if we have much evidence of that," Alex laughed.

"He tolerated me and knew that I was his 'mom,' but in his way, he glommed onto Alex right away," Cindy said. "Riley's foster mother told us that she was accident prone and made a lot of noise, but her husband was a very quiet, patient person, which was clearly easier on Riley. When we first brought Riley and Tima to their room and opened the door to their carriers, Riley was the first to poke his head out and when he saw Alex, he meowed a 'hello' of sorts."

After about three months with their new family members, the couple noticed there was something amiss with Tima. It turned out he had a congenital heart condition and within a year of being with his forever family, Tima passed at the age of 2. The couple decided that Riley really needed another cat friend and they went back to the Homeless Cat Network. "They were so supportive when Tima was ill."

That's when they met Mickey. They brought him home on a two week trial basis. After just a little while, they knew Riley really liked Mickey and that Mickey was a good fit for the whole family.



Riley confirms his brotherly love for Mickey.

"Mickey is a big love bug," Cindy said. "When we first adopted him I was concerned because he was really scared. He had been in a cat hoarder situation and he comes with his own issues. But I learned that once he sits in my lap, he is nearly impossible to move."

From day one, Riley taught Alex and Cindy that he could never completely relax when people were near.

"He had a very steady way of assuaging his own paranoias and insecurities," Alex said. "For instance, one thing he was cautious about was being fed. We led the cats into another room to be fed and we would put their food by the door. Riley would jump outside the doorway and then back in like he was getting rid of the evil spirits. I thought of him as sort of 'Rain Man.' In order to keep himself feeling good, he had all his rituals."

Companion Best Friends

The story of Riley: this feral cat taught and learned the gift of acceptance (page 3)

The couple said that over a period of time, Riley's sense of "safe space" increased.

"When Riley first got here, I couldn't get within 10 feet of him," Alex said. "And he would never let anyone pick him up. But as the years went by, I could sometimes approach him. We learned that if you didn't look right at him and kept your back to him, you could go by. And he became our morning 'alarm' cat. That was in incremental steps. First he would stand in our doorway and meow. Then one day he jumped on the bed and eventually, he would jump up and walk all over us and start meowing. Over time he learned to just sit quietly and stare at us until someone stirred and then he would meow and walk all over us."

"It had to be on his terms," Cindy said. "When he approached us, we could pat him, as long as we were still there in bed, and give him tummy rubs. We were amazed when he let us give him tummy rubs. We loved that."

This is not to say the ever-finding-his-courage sweet feral, did not enjoy countless moments of life without worry. He loved the "Kitty Fun Box." It's a big cardboard box, loaded with cat toys inside that can be pulled out by busy paws and shot around the house. There were also his frequent races with Mickey up and down the hall. Additionally, he was quite content to sleep like a sack of potatoes in any number of his favorite spots.



At sleepy attention in the swivel chair.



Adjusting to the comforts of the bean bag.

"If there was a chair he was in it," Cindy said. "He just had a way of totally flopping and sprawling out."

When it was mealtime, he made it his job to stand at one of the two doors into the kitchen to signal he was ready for food, and he had his favorites. He enjoyed cat grass and he was head-over-heels with his mainstay, bison. He also had a real character trait of curiosity. Despite his shyness, he observed from a distance and did not go into hiding when something new was happening.

"We used to have this big chaise and both Mickey and Riley would sit on it, and I would sit someplace else," Alex chuckled. "Eventually we replaced the chaise with a recliner and a couch and when Cindy sat down in the recliner and I sat on the sofa, Mickey would jump up in Cindy's lap and Riley, over time, started coming in. He looked like he was interested in joining us but he would give up and do something else. In his later years, he would sit next to me on the sofa, but it wasn't clear that he wanted to be patted. So while Cindy and Mickey bonded away, I have this image of we two males, being unable to emotionally interact but we could bond as males. We did our best."

Riley remained lean throughout his life. "His neuroses kept him trim!" He was always very well behaved but because he was so feral, he could not be taken to a veterinarian.

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The story of Riley: this feral cat taught and learned the gift of acceptance (page 4)



Riles and Mick in the small cat perch built for two.



Riley the Alien Cat.

"At the beginning of every New Year, I would ask him, 'Are you going to let me pick you up this year?'" Cindy said and the understood answer was always "no."



Riley reclines in the tall cat perch.

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Companion Best Friends

The story of Riley: this feral cat taught and learned the gift of acceptance (page 5)

In January of this year, he got very sick and for the first time, Riley was visited by a vet.

"Because of how he was, we knew when we first brought him home that we wouldn't be able to have a vet come and give him shots."

Riley had pancreatitis.

"In the last hour of his life, I got to pick him up and petted him and he died in my arms," Cindy said. "It made me happy. We loved him, quirks and all, and we know that it was on his own terms that he died."

In his way, always true to himself, Riley was a teacher to his loving family.

"He taught me patience and acceptance," Cindy said.

"From Riley I got a new dimension of being sensitive to others' feelings," Alex said. "I couldn't just walk in the room when Riley was there. I had to walk in slowly, quietly with eyes averted to see if he was there, to avoid staring. He made me very sensitive to what I needed to do to make him feel safe."

"He was our little character."

If anyone would like to pull up a chair to a Riley "talk," please learn about the Homeless Cat Network at www.homelesscatnetwork.com. Homeless Cat Network is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) nonprofit, no-kill rescue organization. To make a donation in Riley's name, please consider this nonprofit which provided Riley the home of his dreams.



Riley and his dear friend Mickey.

