



Hilda, a permanent resident at the Sunshine Home in Richmond, brushes up against her keeper Paul Dewey.

Richmond's version of a

Cat House

Alternative housing and care for cats whose owners are in need.

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In the rolling hills of Richmond, Ontario County, Paul and Debbie Dewey designed and built their dream home.

With fifteen smaller rooms surrounding a large, common area, the home allows one to gaze out upon wildflowers from picture windows and listen to the chirping of birds and the occasional crowing of a rooster named Petey.

But this home isn't for the Deweys. It's for cats whose owners are away for long stretches of time, as well as for cats whose owners want to ensure they're well taken care of, but cannot take care of the animals themselves.

Called the Sunshine Home, the facility is inhabited by felines of every shape, size and personality.

For starters, there's Howie – “the official greeter” – and his sister, Hilda. Then there's Annie, who loves watching birds, and Ruthie, an old girl fond of napping. Yuippuni, meanwhile, climbs everything in sight.

In all, as many as 30 cats can live here. Some are long-term boarders, while others, in the lifetime care program, have been signed over by their owners.

“It's just so much fun,” Paul says, “and it's a nice way to meet people from all over the world.”

For example, sisters Ai and Chirolyn are from Toyko, while Fullsail and Singha are from Atlanta.

Frasier, meanwhile, hails from New York City. His owner got engaged to a man who owns a dog and Frasier can't stand dogs. He is staying at the Sunshine Home until his owner and her fiancé finish building a home where he will have his own room.

Frasier's owner didn't think he liked other cats, but he seems to be enjoying himself. “He's already got two friends he comes out and plays with,” Paul says.

Frasier's room, like each of the 14 other small-

er rooms, is about 50 square feet, with its own window and a hiding place. Some of the furnishings, the Deweys picked up at yard sales, but many come from the cats' own homes.

One woman had never left her cats before but, while scouting out a new place to live out West, made sure they had her Lazy Boy chair, rug, lamp, book rack and end table.

"She pretty much reproduced her whole living room," Paul says.

Such arrangements are fine with the Deweys. To them, it's all about making the cats more comfortable.

The couple even plays music for their feline friends, switching between classic and country. A CD from a Native American singer is also on heavy rotation.

"The cats just love her. Just something about the music puts them at ease," Paul notes.

Putting cat owners at ease is the premise behind the Sunshine Home. Paul and Debbie, whose respective backgrounds are in sales/quality control and bank auditing, came up with the idea while living in Fairport.

"We don't have any kids and even though we were young and healthy, we got to wondering what was going to happen to our cats if something happened to us," Paul says.

After doing a little research and finding few options, Paul recalls, "We said, 'You know what? We'll just build a place.'"

When they moved to Richmond in 2000, the original plan was to retrofit a dog kennel on the property, but they wound up bulldozing it and starting from scratch.

"We designed it to make sure every single room gets sunshine," Paul says.

The Deweys spend much of each day cleaning and doing chores alongside their charges. "Movie night" is each Saturday, when they curl up with the cats on a futon in the large room and



Above: A typical day of a cat at the Sunshine Home in Richmond is something like this as Chuck demonstrates while basking in the sun. Chuck is a permanent resident at the home. Right: Yuippuni, who was born in Shanghai, China but from New Mexico gets up from her cat nap at the Sunshine Home in Richmond



watch flicks together. Even when they're sleeping, the Deweys are not far away.

"We have a baby monitor in the house and in here, so if we hear strange noises or something like that, we can come out and check on things," Debbie says.

For long-term boarding, the cost is \$385 per month, per room, whether that room houses one cat or three from the same family. The Deweys don't charge extra for administering medications or playing with the cats.

For the cats in the lifetime care program, the cost of peace of mind is between \$4,000 and \$15,000, depending on the age.

But as the Deweys have found, much of that money can go quickly. The weekly cat food/litter bill is about \$300 and medical costs can skyrocket. Over two weeks in March, they spent about \$7,000.

"We lived over at the emergency clinic in Henrietta," Paul says.

Dr. Lenora K. Petty of Hershey, Pa. has two

cats at the Sunshine Home. Guy has a neurological disorder and is in lifetime care, while Misty is a long-term boarder who, for whatever reason, became so stressed out in the home that she overgroomed to the point her skin bled.

Petty said her husband researched a number of places online. She and her husband chatted with the Deweys and with references, too.

"We chose this place because they seem to be so dedicated to taking care of the cats, no matter what their problems are," Petty says, noting that other places were not interested in taking cats that had any kind of medical issues.

Also, Petty notes, Misty is almost 19 and cats – especially older ones – seem to need stability in terms of their caretakers.

Petty and her husband receive pictures via e-mail and call as often as they want. The Deweys – who have set up Web cams for other owners – will hold the phone up to Misty so she can hear her owners' voices. "Misty talks, let me tell you," Petty says, laughing.

As for the overgrooming, it's a thing of the past. "I feel very comfortable. My husband does, too," Petty says. "Obviously, Paul and Deb are very special people."

While Paul initially did a little public speaking about the Sunshine Home, word of mouth and the Internet have taken things to the point where there is no need for him to make a sales pitch.

He says the only pitch he wants to make – aside from urging people to spay and neuter their pets – is to encourage folks to make provisions for their animals, should anything prevent them from caring for them.

Debbie agrees.

"It's so important," she says.