

News Feature



Samantha Butler and family with foster kittens. Clockwise from right: Sam with Artemis, daughter Hazel with Luna, and niece Sky with Bagheera. Photo courtesy of Samantha Butler.

Foster parents open hearts & homes

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With eyes just beginning to open and bellies aching for mama's milk, the tiny kittens that Samantha Butler found near her Hayden home needed round-the-clock care. Sometimes a nursing mama cat can take orphans under her wing, but no such mama was available when Sam called the Animal Adoption Center of Blount County in August.

So Sam stepped up, becoming the shelter's newest [foster volunteer](#). In addition to bottle-feeding tiny Bagheera, Luna, and Artemis several times a day, Sam and her family provide the loving home environment that is ideal for the health, well-being, and socialization of the kittens.

Sam gets up through the night to make sure the kittens are kept warm with their bellies full. "I work from home so it works for me, but it is a lot like having three infants," Sam explained. Though caring for newborns can be tiring, she said, "Watching them grow is its own reward."

Sam's father, daughter, sister, and other family members all love checking on and cuddling the little ones as they crawl on wobbly legs, scream out with surprisingly assertive meows, and learn how to play. And the family's care offers great benefits for the kittens, too.

"A loving home tends to help animals be better socialized and healthier," said Karen Startley, shelter director. "Fostering gets animals out of the shelter and can extend their lives," such as in the case of Sam's kittens, which "without a place to go, we would have to put down," Karen said.

Ashlynn Brown, the shelter's foster program coordinator, collaborates closely with Sam and other foster volunteers, offering guidance and reassurance. "Fosters must be able to keep an open line of communication with us and be able to get the animal back at the appropriate time," Ashlynn said.

Sam's kittens will return to the shelter at five or six weeks old when they have transitioned to eating solid food. Soon after, they'll be available for adoption.

Because they've been hand-raised, Bagheera, Luna, and Artemis are much more likely to find homes. Animals who live in close contact with humans get a practice run at life with their future family.

Fostered cats and dogs also get more exposure to potential adopters compared to animals in the shelter. After all, who doesn't want to play with foster kittens? Sam's adorable pictures, videos, and stories can unlock a future home for Bagheera, Luna, and Artemis, as can the information she shares about their personalities, full of colorful details only a foster parent could know.

A robust foster program is critical to an animal shelter's success. In addition to the benefits that fostering bestows upon animals' development and their likelihood of adoption, fostering increases the capacity and flexibility of the shelter without the need for additional staff, facilities, or budget.

The shelter's greatest fostering need, according to the Animal Adoption Center's Karen and Ashlynn, is for kitten and puppy bottle babies, pregnant and nursing mama cats and dogs, and for animals who are sick or injured and in need of one-on-one care.

It was a sick kitty who introduced Cleveland resident Andrea Cork to fostering. In 2019, Andrea took home an American Bobtail cat with a skin condition called miliary dermatitis. Now named Christina, the Bobtail became Andrea's "foster fail," she said, the endearing descriptor for animals adopted by their foster parents. Andrea has continued to foster kittens and nursing mama cats "to get them out of the shelter when they are sick or need a quiet place," she said.

Since Andrea also helps out at the shelter on Saturdays, she's had the pleasure of witnessing the adoption of her former fosters. "It brings such joy to your heart to see a fur baby go home with the right person," Andrea said.

Just as with Sam, Andrea's care for animals is a family affair. Her son Wyatt has volunteered at the shelter with her since he was 10 and now works there as a part-time kennel tech. "Fostering helps kids see what it is like to have an animal full time, what it's like to have something completely depend on you," Andrea said. "I think every child should volunteer or foster or both before a parent lets them get a pet."

In addition to being an educational experience for kids, fostering can be well-suited to those who love animals but may not be ready or able to adopt. College students, military, retirees, and people who travel frequently are all perfect candidates to bring cats or dogs into their lives on a temporary basis. The usual foster placement is a few weeks up to a couple of months, according to shelter director Karen Startley.

The shelter provides food, supplies, and limited medical care. Foster volunteers, who must be at least 18 years old and live in Blount County, offer a clean, safe environment for their fosters and the nurturing that they need to thrive.

Those interested are encouraged to fill out an application at the shelter. The Animal Adoption Center of Blount County welcomes visitors Tuesday through Friday from 11-4:30 and Saturday from 9-2. The shelter is located at 5554 County Highway 1 in Cleveland and can be reached at 205-973-0493.