

# Heroine for the homeless

## German teen helps promote welfare of stray cats

By Zhao Hongyi

Eighteen-year-old Charlotte Landwehr has cared for dozens of homeless cats since she discovered their plight five years ago. She is also actively involved in finding them a permanent home and in teaching urbanites how to co-exist.

### The magic whistle

In her home in a Sanlitun compound, 18-year-old Charlotte Landwehr whistles and cats immediately dash out from various directions to nestle at her feet.

"Only her whistle works, no one else's does," says her father Andreas, who works as a correspondent for the German news agency Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA).

Charlotte brings out food and pours water into small bowls. The cats know it's dinner time.

This has been a daily routine for the German girl the past five years – ever since she read an article online about the rising number of stray cats in Beijing, and how some end up tortured for perverse fun or served on a plate.

At 13, she knew she had to do something. "At the beginning, I only fed the cats occasionally," Charlotte says. "But I soon found that they liked to cuddle up to me though they were always timid."

She decided to provide a home to some of them: Tiger, Pauly, Charlie, Toby and Melody.

### Famous in the expat community

The New Zealand Embassy once called Charlotte after staff members discovered two stray cats wandering the embassy compound. Charlotte and her friends went to the embassy right away, trapped the cats and took them home.

In the past five years, Charlotte has saved 14 strays, including those she adopted. "I have one cat at home that is losing her fur," she says. "I don't know why – either she is too old or has a disease – but I know she needs my care."

Unlike most teenage girls who splurge on music CDs, clothes and makeup, Charlotte spends her allowance on cat food.

She also regularly receives donations of 30 to 50 yuan from members of the

diplomatic community who know of her advocacy. Charlotte is grateful for the money, but says what she has is far short of what she needs: she has to have the animals neutered and the sick ones require surgery.

She has so far spent nearly 10,000 yuan. "We'll continue to support her work as long as she is doing it," Andreas says.

### From child to young adulthood

Charlotte came to Beijing at age 1, when her father was assigned here in 1993.

She attended primary school at the German International School and high school at the Western Academy of Beijing, but considers herself deeply connected to the city.

She has loved animals since she was a young girl. Besides homeless cats, she has taken care of dogs, birds, rabbits and tortoises.

Now she spends her mornings in school and her afternoons or evenings and weekends taking care of the cats.

While most children outgrow their fascination with animals at puberty, Charlotte's is looking like a long-term thing. She got an internship at a local pet clinic a few years ago and has since become an expert in cat care and treatment.

### Solution to huge stray population

A cat can give birth four times a year and can have as many as six kittens with each litter. The population of stray cats has spiked in recent years and the only solution, Charlotte says, "is to neuter and spay them."

Charlotte is advocating the Trap, Neuter and Return (TNR) method to control the population of stray animals. This involves catching them using spacious and humane traps, neutering them and finally returning them to their original habitat.



Stray cats are the companions of Charlotte in her spare time.

Photo by Zhao Hongyi



Charlotte's website has a list of stray cats for adoption.

Photos provided by charlyscats.org

She has joined a number of pet clinics in a campaign to raise money for more sterilization procedures, and has so far helped neuter and spay 10 cats. She says a small part of their ear is docked to indicate they have already received the operation.

She and animal welfare advocates are also encouraging local residents to adopt homeless cats, as well as conducting education campaigns about how to humanely deal with strays.

"Most cats are abandoned by irresponsible owners," Charlotte says, adding that cats are easy pets if their owners have even basic knowledge about animal care.

To encourage more cat adoptions, the teen started a website, charlyscats.org. On it, she has a list of cats waiting for loving homes. She also has ads seeking more volunteers and donations.

Her work has been featured in various international and local media, including *Germany-Radio*, *Germany TV Station* and *Global Times*.

### Protection work continues

But Charlotte says there is more to be done. Last year, she wrote a school thesis, "Stray Cats in Beijing", discussing the reasons for the increase in the ani-

mals' population and offering solutions to the problem.

The study says there is an estimated half a million stray cats in Beijing that spread deadly disease.

In 2003, cats were identified as one of the main sources of the H1N1 virus and thus became targets for elimination. Some residents trapped and killed strays, while others served them for dinner.

"Don't kill them and don't eat them," Charlotte pleaded. "Have them neutered, which is a simple procedure. And give them food, take care of them."

Her father will soon finish his contract in Beijing so the Landwehrs will return to Germany, where Charlotte will attend university. But she is adamant that the work of caring for homeless animals continue.

She is hopeful about their prospects, particularly after learning that a group of Chinese scholars is drafting an animal-welfare law, which will provide better care for strays.

### Charlotte's contact information

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