

PETS

For the Love of Lily

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It's just a cat, right? A feral cat at that. Not a fancy purebred or anything. Why not just get another one? For some, it is hard to fathom why anyone would go to great lengths and expense to treat a pet's serious illness or injury. Until it happens to them. Then the struggle with a difficult decision begins. That's why I'm sharing our journey through this process, with hopes it may help shed some light for others facing similar circumstances.



AT SIX WEEKS OLD, River and Lily came up for adoption online through a feline rescue group.

Stoner-Hamberg file photos

Meeting Lily

Six years ago, Jana Stoner and I had recently lost her elderly gray tabby named Maggie, and were ready to rescue a couple of kittens. With the long hours we work at this newspaper, we wanted a bonded pair of littermate sisters to keep each other company. We checked locally with Lori Clemente at ARRF Animal Rescue, but none matching that wish list came up for adoption at the time.

So when we saw the giant "alien baby" eyes of one of the two six week old calico littermate sisters up for adoption on PetFinder.com, we instantly fell in love with both of the kittens. We anxiously awaited their release from foster care after spaying at nine weeks, and this journey began. Found near the Columbia River, we named the one with more white "Water Lily" and the one with a river of copper color running down her head and neck "Copper River".

Early on, Lily was extremely shy and timid, with River being the more adventurous. But as they grew, Lily actually became the more bold and vocal of the two. As hoped, the bonded littermates spent many hours of the day curled up together in one big black, orange and white ball of purring fur.



POST-SURGERY feline fashion as worn by Lily – an altered baby onesie and soft cone to keep her from pulling her stitches out.

"That wasn't there before."

Fast forward to July of this year. While petting Lily, we notice a small swollen spot, about the size of a quarter, on her right hip. Wondering if maybe the sisters had gotten a little rough in their play, leaving an infected spot, we called the office of our veterinarian, Dr. Valerie Hedrick, and asked if we could move up their annual checkup a few weeks to have that examined.

The concerned expression on Dr. Val's face as she pal-

pated the area was our first clue that something more serious might be happening. After all, this was only a six year old cat, in her prime it couldn't be something worse. Could it? A surgery to remove the lump and send it to the lab for testing was scheduled, and soon little Lily got her first set of Frankenstein stitches running down her hip and thigh. Dr. Val explained that she ended up having to take more tissue than originally thought to try to obtain what is known as "clean margins".

Back home from surgery #1

Anyone who has struggled getting a squirming infant into a onesie has a pretty good idea of what it was like putting the little yellow bumblebee striped one on Lily. Now just add a long tail and stickery tipped paws to the mix and the mental image should be fairly accurate. Next came the royal blue soft surfaced "cone of shame" to complete the Halloween costume dubbed "Feline Humiliation." Between the strange outfit, effects of the cocktails of post-surgery medications and strange smells from the vet's office, River was not sure about this odd creature we had brought home. She even

raised her hackles and hissed a time or two, taking awhile to warm back up to her.

The results are in

The histology report from the lab was not good. Malignant. "Feline Injection Site Sarcoma" (FISS). What the heck is that? My first career path included a B.S. degree in Animal Science, but I had not heard of this particular kind of kitty cancer. Not surprising, since this very rare type occurs in only about 1 in up to 10,000 feline vaccination sites. The tumor developed in the standard location for the rabies shot, however, it is actually an unusual reaction some cats have to an ingredient called an adjuvant added to help the vaccine work better by getting the body to produce a stronger immune response, rather than the active part of the vaccine itself. Worse yet, the lab could not define a safe "clean margin" in Lily's tissue, making the chance of recurrence very high.

(Vaccination note: Like most responsible pet owners, we have always diligently kept our animals vaccinated. Vaccine formulas have changed in the years since Lily's last rabies shot, and the occurrence of these sarcomas has decreased as the vaccines improve. Vaccinations prevent disease in millions of cats without incident, and while discontinuing Lily's vaccination schedule is called for due to her specific rare case, we continue to see the value of protecting our other animals by vaccinating against the more common threats of disease.)

Prognosis: only months to live if untreated

It can take up to four years after vaccination for a tumor to develop, but once it appears FISS is a locally aggressive kind of cancer. Dr. Val explained that even the tiniest remaining pointy bits of the star shaped sarcoma cells could regenerate the removed tumor, and fast. Our beloved six year old Lily was given just months to live. Devastating news.

Treatment options ranging up to \$11,000

That's not a typo. Up to \$11,000. As producers of a small community weekly newspaper, a labor of love, we are not made of money by any

means, and there was no pet insurance to help offset those large costs, which would be due at the time of treatment. Through the tears, we tried to focus on the description of the treatment options. If we opted to pursue further remedies, Dr. Val would refer us to the WSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital's oncology department which has the cutting edge equipment and specialists to give the next level of care.

Vaccine company steps up

As part of their due diligence, Stacy and Erin, staff members at Mt. Stuart Animal Hospital submitted Lily's report and billing paperwork to the company which produced the vaccine. Much to our surprise, they responded with an offer to reimburse up to about half of the estimated amount of treatment. We were also introduced to "Care Credit" which provides loans for health care, including veterinary treatment, with a special credit card that offers no interest if paid off in six months. Between the two sources, we would have the majority of the upfront funds needed. Now we just had to weigh the other factors.

Pros and cons list

When a pet is seen as a member of the family, it is very difficult to think objectively about a literal life or death decision. It helped to sit down and



EXAM TIME with Dr. Valerie Hedrick at Mt. Stuart Animal Hospital for Lily.

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TWO SURGICAL INCISIONS, increasingly larger, on her right side show the area where Lily had soft tissue surgery twice to remove the "Feline Injection Site Sarcoma" cancerous cells before radiation therapy began.



come up with a list of reasons why we should consider treatment and the concerns we had.

The concerns –

- **What are the odds** of recurrence after all this?
- **Quality of life** – what would we be putting her through and what impacts would it have on her future life, especially if amputation was necessary?
- **Expense** – that's a lot of money due immediately, and we have no pet insurance
- **Long distance travel** – we were looking at hauling Lily, who doesn't enjoy car rides even to Ellensburg, hundreds of miles for at least 3 round trips to Pullman, about 4 hours each way.
- **She would be gone** from home most of a month for the 18 radiation treatments.

The reasons why we should consider treatment –

- **Lily is only six years old**, with a chance at many good years ahead of her.
- **While aggressive locally**, this type of cancer is less likely to spread elsewhere if successfully treated
- **There was financial support** to help
- **We were told that cats respond very well** to radiation therapy with minimal side effects
- **She would be in good hands** with the specialists at WSU, and their technologically advanced facility. Many will remember the recent story of the seriously injured locally fostered Black Lab named **Railroad** and the excellent care he received there
- **Is it selfish to want a family member to stay around?** Lily's affectionate personality and "cuteness" factor make it easy to love her, hard to think of not doing what we could to keep her around
- **We intentionally sought bonded littermates**, and worried about her sister being alone.

All in

After much soul-searching and guidance from Dr. Val, Lori at ARRF, family and

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friends, we came to the conclusion that in Lily's case, doing what we could to save her life would be the right, and doable, decision. We were now all in, and ready and willing to do what it would take, for the love of Lily.

Poked, prodded, scanned and x-rayed

We strapped her carrier in the back seat and headed off to my alma mater, WSU Oct. 2 for her diagnostic appointment the next day. After an overnight hotel stay, she went in for her physical examination with Oncology Resident **Dr. Sarah Wetzel, DVM** and student **Cinda P.**, then she endured lab tests, radiographs and a CT scan like a champ. In fact, the radiologist said that Lily was the best cat patient ever, freezing in the awkward position on her back with paws up and out like a cat burglar caught by the police. The good news was that it looked like Lily would be a good candidate for soft tissue surgery, without having to remove the leg and part of the hip and pelvis bones as originally expected. We credit much of this lucky break to the good job Dr. Val did in the initial surgery. The next surgery was scheduled for Oct. 11.

Surgery #2

After one final preliminary test, Lily once again had her hip area operated on, this time removing more tissue to expand the margins, by the surgical team of **Dr. Bonnie Campbell, DVM, PhD, DACVS**, Surgery Resident **Chi-Ya Chen, BVetMed**, and student **Sara Galder**. We always teased Lily about her "udders", the loose flabby skin on her undercarriage, but this time we were glad she had it. In what we called her "tummy tuck" the surgeon was able to stretch that extra skin to cover the larger surgery area and stitch it up, avoiding having to graft tissue from another area. Everything went well, and a few days later, she was able to go back home in her onesie and protective cone again to heal up for several weeks. Fortunately she managed to get through both surgeries without a limp or major scarring.

Coug Camp

On Oct. 24, we packed up her favorite blanket, a bone-shaped plush toy that smelled like home, along with a bag of her food and other items. Lily entered "Coug Camp" as WSU, home of the Cougars, calls the long-term boarding quarters to begin her treatments on the following Monday. **Dr. Tien Tien, DVM**, explained that Lily would be briefly anesthetized for a few minutes for each of the 18 weekday treatments, and



AS ONE OF THE BEST equipped Veterinary Teaching Hospitals in the nation, WSU fourth-year professional veterinary students and postgraduate students (interns, residents, and graduate students) work together with clinical faculty and staff to diagnose and treat patients.

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DAILY UPDATES from WSU 'Coug Camp' were comforting and humorous like this photo of Lily (above) singing for her supper or was she performing a catnip operatic aria? Then there was this selfie photo we received from Janae and Lily one evening.

WSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital Oncology Dept.



would be fully awake within a few seconds afterwards. She also said that cats tolerate radiation very well, and side effects usually very minor, the most notable being a pinkness



A BONDED PAIR. River and Lily, in a photo from 2017, show how much they love each other as littermate sisters and spoiled housecats.

N.K.C. TRIBUNE/Terry Hamberg photo - 2019

of the skin, like a sunburn.

A very comforting part of Lily's treatment, were the daily updates from the fourth year vet students caring for her, in the form of emails, often with photos or videos, and phone calls. Over the course of her radiation therapy, three students watched over her, **Janae Umbaugh, Katelyn Waggoner** and **Kaylie Shaver**. And Lily charmed every one of them. The vocal little calico came to be known for welcoming them



LILY COMPLETED HER radiation therapy at WSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Pullman on November 22. Her oncology team (L-R): technician Casey, **Dr. Tien, DVM**, and student **Kaylie** take a moment to celebrate Lily's journey through the 18 cancer treatments.

Photo courtesy of WSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital Oncology Dept.



HOUSECAT LILY ADAPTS to 'Coug Camp' [kennel] bunk living with a few extra things from home during her four-week stay in Pullman.

Photo courtesy of WSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital Oncology Dept.

and chattering for the duration of their visits, and for her enthusiasm for meals and treats. It was heartening to us to hear that her appetite remained unaffected. We sent a "Camp Care Package" partway through her stay with her favorite treats and some toys. Janae made a little video of the unboxing and it was fun to watch Lily rubbing against her hand, purring, and getting excited while Janae tried to open the treat package. She read the card aloud to Lily, and hung up the photo we sent of Lily with River as a poster in her kennel. The personal touch really helped relieve the anxiety of leaving a pet for most of a month.

On Nov. 22, Lily had her final dose of radiation, and we came in for a visit that evening. It was a happy reunion for us, and a little bittersweet for her caretakers, who had become fond of her. The next morning, we settled up the

bill, which was several thousand dollars lower than estimated (a pleasant surprise) and got a detailed summary of everything that was done and instructions of what to keep an eye out for over the upcoming weeks and months. **Lori Clemente** from **ARRF** was among those anxious for a report on Lily's condition. It felt good to text her from the veterinary hospital that we had Lily loaded up for the homeward trek. The moral support of our fellow animal lovers, and the professional, compassionate care of everyone at **Mt. Stuart Animal Hospital** and the **WSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital**, helped us get through this journey.

Happy to be home

As soon as the car door opened in the driveway, Lily began meowing very loudly, announcing her arrival and anticipation of getting inside her home. True to form, she went to her bowl, looking for

a homecoming meal or treat. Did we indulge her? Of course we did. Once again River was not sure about the half-shaved, funny smelling loud mouthed creature we brought into the house, but soon readjusted. It wasn't long before Lily made her way to her favorite place, snuggled in close on one lap or the other, purring to beat the band, and bestowing occasional kitty kisses on her people. The feeling was mutual. Looking in those contented green eyes on the other end of it all, it's now hard to imagine that there was ever a struggle to decide.

Worth it?
Definitely.



JANA COMFORTS LILY following her second soft tissue surgery a few hours post-surgery at WSU.

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HEADING HOME. Following the discharge notes from **Dr. Tien**, Lily is escorted to the waiting room with her travel bag of goodies by student caretaker **Kaylie**.

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