

Food *for the* Soul

This holiday
season, fill a pet's
food bowl.
And his or her
person's heart.

by
SANDY
MILLER



Chrys Armijo and his dog, Majik



PHOTO BY KIRA DEDECKER

Chrys and Majik

To Chrys Armijo, Majik is much more than just a service dog. The black retriever is his best friend, his helper and, sometimes, his psychologist. Majik is family.



Chrys was born with spina bifida, a congenital disorder that left him wheelchair-bound. There were times when he found himself feeling angry and depressed — that is, until Majik came along. Chrys adopted him from a shelter in Phoenix, Arizona, back in 2004.

Or to hear Chrys tell it, Majik adopted him. “He was out on his daily walk and when he saw me, he just ran up and sat at my feet,” Chrys says. It was love at first sight.

Shortly after adopting Majik, Chrys linked up with Happy Tails Service Dogs, a local organization that helps physically challenged people train their own dogs to be service dogs. Majik and Chrys passed the training classes with the proverbial flying colors. However, not long after, Chrys fell on hard times and his low-wage job wasn't paying enough to put food on the table or in Majik's bowl.

Although Chrys sometimes went without food himself, he wouldn't think of letting Majik go hungry. So he reached out to Happy Tails for help.

Luckily, Happy Tails has a partnership with the Empty Bowl Pet Food Pantry, another Phoenix-based organization that provides pet food to Happy Tails and other

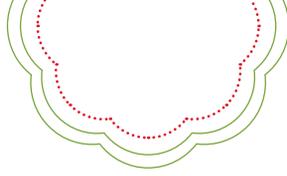
agencies to distribute to people in need. Thanks to that partnership, Majik's bowl has never gone empty. Things are looking up for Chrys, too. He now makes a living wage working as a customer service representative for a computer company.

But Chrys is just one of many people and pets that the Empty Bowl has helped since C.J. Anderson and three others started the pet food pantry in 2010 with just \$40 and 40 pounds of pet food. “We wanted to make a difference in Arizona,” C.J. says. And ultimately what started as a tiny grassroots operation has grown by leaps and bounds. In 2013 alone, Empty Bowl provided 350,000 pounds of pet food and pet items to recipients in five counties in Arizona.

Full cupboard

It was 2010 and Jennifer Sullivan and Lisa Clark were having a conversation in a mutual friend's kitchen. They didn't know each other well, but soon realized they had a lot in common. Both had lost their mothers in February 1994. They talked about how their pets — for Jennifer it was a little calico cat named Fingas and for Lisa a handsome tuxedo cat named Slapshot — had helped them through those dark days. “Fingas was a rock for me. When the world felt like it was caving in, she was there,” Jennifer says.

Jennifer and Lisa know well the bond that people share with their pets, and they couldn't imagine anyone



“We get food and it goes right out. There’s such a huge need.”

~ Lisa Clark, co-founder of Kibble Cupboard

having to give up their pets because they couldn’t afford to feed them. That’s when they decided to start Kibble Cupboard, a pet food bank in south New Jersey.

They began by asking local businesses to allow them to put donation bins in their offices and stores. They distributed food in a mall parking lot where a veterinarian was holding a free clinic. They contacted shelters to ask for referrals to people who were thinking of giving up their pets. Word spread fast about their mission, and soon everyone from the local humane society to groups of elementary school students began holding pet food drives for them. They rented a small storage unit where they hand out food on the third Saturday of each month.

“We get food and it goes right out,” Lisa says. “There’s such a huge need.” In fact, in 2013, the volunteer organization distributed more than 8,000 pounds of food and cat litter to seniors and other low-income individuals and families, including some who are disabled or homeless.

Jennifer, Lisa and the other Kibble Cupboard volunteers have made life much better for pets, and for the people who love them. “It’s not just about feeding the mouths of the pets,” Jennifer says. “We’re also feeding the souls of people.”

A very special bond

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, there are about 3.5 million homeless people in the U.S., and 5 to 10 percent of them have dogs and/or cats. In some areas of the country, the rate is as high as 24 percent.

During a trip to New York City, Genevieve Frederick saw a homeless man panhandling on the street, his loyal dog at his side. It moved her so much that she made it her mission to help people and pets like this. She went home to Carson City, Nevada, and was inspired to start Pets of the Homeless. After all, the homeless have a very special bond with their pets. Often, their pets are their only family. Pets of the Homeless sums it up as part of its mission statement. The organization “believes in the healing power of companion pets and of the human/animal bond which is very important in the lives of many homeless. They find solace, protection and companionship through their pets.”

Anyone who qualifies to receive food from the food banks can receive pet food and supplies from Pets of the Homeless, explains Renee Lowry, executive director of Pets of the Homeless. “They are typically desperate



Jennifer Sullivan and Lisa Clark started the pet food pantry Kibble Cupboard in New Jersey.

PHOTO BY SHAUN REILLY

Since its start six years ago, Pets of the Homeless has helped more than 10,000 pets by distributing pet food and supplies to people in need.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PETS OF THE HOMELESS



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for help,” Renee says. Since 2008, the organization has helped more than 10,650 pets and has collected 286 tons of pet food and supplies at its 477 pet food collection sites and 414 distribution sites across the country and into Canada. Many distribution sites are located at food banks, pantries and soup kitchens, so the homeless can pick up food for both themselves and their pets.

One of those distribution sites is St. Vincent’s Food Pantry in Reno, Nevada. St. Vincent’s provides pet food to about 4,000 people each month, says Scott Cooksley, director of the food pantry. Scott agrees that it’s vital to keep homeless people and their pets together. “For a lot of people, these pets are their comfort,” Scott says. “They keep them from getting into a depression, and when they care for their pets, they’re trying to be responsible. Having their pets makes them feel good. It gives them a sense of purpose.”

Helping small rescue groups

John Kane of Houston, Texas, went to New Orleans in mid-September of 2005 to volunteer to help pets in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He spent a lot of his time volunteering with the Best Friends rescue mission at St. Francis Animal Sanctuary in Tylertown, Mississippi, where he found supplies, arranged for transportation and deliveries, put up fences for kennels, set up trailers and living facilities for volunteers, and helped with other tasks. One thing that really impressed John was how many volunteers were from small rescue groups. “The little groups did everything from feeding animals to cleaning cages to helping out with first aid,” John says. “The recovery from Katrina could not have been done without the support of hundreds of small rescue groups.”

So when John returned to Houston, he decided he wanted to start an organization to aid these types of rescue groups. He and his partner, Elizabeth Asher, a family law attorney, launched Rescue Bank, a nonprofit national pet food distribution program to help small rescue and foster groups that have limited access to resources.

In the beginning, it was a small local operation, with grocery stores donating broken bags of pet food, all of which was donated to local rescue groups. Rescue Bank soon developed relationships with large pet food manufacturers, which now donate pet food with packaging defects or food nearing its “sell by” date. These days, Rescue Bank operates on the national food bank model, accepting food from any manufacturer, distributor or retailer and networking with food banks across the country.

By working together, today there are 30 Rescue Bank distribution centers across the U.S. providing food and supplies to small rescue groups. “We have delivered more than 75 million meals through the Rescue Bank network,” John says. Rescue Bank pays for the freight to deliver the donations to the regional distribution centers, where it is picked up by pre-qualified nonprofit groups. John says 85 to 90 percent of the food goes to the rescue groups and the other 10 to 15 percent goes to pet food banks to help families.



DIY

Pet food pantry

Looking for a meaningful project to launch in the new year? You might think about beginning your own pet food pantry. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **First, do some research** to find out whether your area already has a local pet food pantry. If there’s a comprehensive, successful program already in place, no sense in re-inventing the wheel. Volunteer to help out with the existing food pantry instead.
- **If you determine that there is a need**, talk to people around the country who’ve established pet food pantries to see how they did it.
- **Research what kind of space you’ll need** and what you’ll have to do to safely store perishable food.
- **Ask local businesses** to allow you to place donation bins in their establishments and to help you get the word out.
- **Reach out to your community** to recruit volunteers and get help with food drives.
- **Talk to the managers at pet stores** and grocery stores to see if they can donate broken bags of food or food that is getting close to its “sell by” date.
- **Reach out to local people food banks** to find out if they would be willing to stock and distribute the pet food you collect.
- **Once your pet food pantry is established**, make sure local shelters know the resource is available so they can refer people who might be thinking of relinquishing their pets.



“We have delivered more than 75 million meals through the Rescue Bank network.”

~ John Kane

Best Friends dishes up the goods

Recognizing that many families who fall on hard financial times often feel forced to surrender their beloved pets to shelters in order to make ends meet, Best Friends Animal Society–Utah opened a pet food pantry in January 2014 at the Best Friends Pet Adoption Center in Salt Lake City. In the first five months alone, the pet food pantry provided more than 6.5 tons of food to people in need, feeding more than 5,000 dogs and cats. The food is donated by individuals and businesses in the community.

“When a family comes on hard times, pets often end up in shelters,” says Ashley Farmer, spay/neuter services manager for Best Friends–Utah. “We have resources to help people keep their pets.” The pantry is available to low-income people who can provide proof of need, such as food stamp cards, Medicaid cards or credentials from other assistance programs that are helping them.

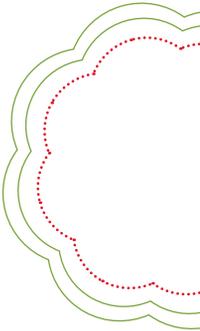
“We serve many working poor and people who are on disability, unemployment and food stamps,” Ashley says. “They’re grateful for the help.”

Like many other pet food pantries across the country, the Best Friends pantry also provides free spay/neuter

vouchers to first-time users of the program whose pets aren’t fixed. The vouchers must be redeemed if those individuals want to receive assistance a second time.

All of these pet food banks, pantries and programs are saving lives by meeting a basic need — pet food. While many started small, with a couple of people putting their heads together to find a way to help local folks struggling to put food in their pets’ dishes, today their efforts are going a long way in helping people keep their pets in their homes and out of shelters. They’re enabling small rescue groups with shoestring budgets to use their scarce resources to provide other lifesaving services such as spay/neuter.

The result? All of them are playing a vital role in bringing us closer to the goal to Save Them All. So this holiday season, when you think about filling your loved ones’ stockings, perhaps you’ll also consider filling a pet’s belly — and his or her person’s heart. 🐾



’Tis the season of giving

This holiday season, in lieu of hostess gifts, why not collect pet supplies for those in need? Position a basket at the entry of your home and simply tell dinner and party guests to hold the poinsettias — and bring a food donation instead.

Another idea is to conduct a holiday pet food drive in your neighborhood or community. Go to bestfriends.org/resources and click on “For Shelters and Rescuers” for some tips.