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# A year after devastating fire, Pet Alliance opens new downtown Orlando shelter



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Ashley Peterson recalls waking up to 25 text messages and multiple missed phone calls the morning after a fire destroyed the shelter she had served for six years.

Peterson, an animal care specialist at Pet Alliance of Greater Orlando, said seeing the devastation at the organization's shelter and knowing some of the cats had not survived was the hardest part of that tragic day.

"It was hard seeing that big gaping hole in the middle, knowing that some of our cats didn't make it," Peterson said.

A year after the fire that killed 17 cats and forced Pet Alliance to close its shelter on Conroy Road, the organization celebrated the grand opening of a new cat shelter in downtown Orlando on Tuesday.

Executive Director Steve Bardy said the ceremony reflected the end of a painful night and a new beginning for the organization.

“A year ago we had a massive fire and I like to call that our before, and you can’t really start over and begin again until you have an after and our new cat shelter downtown is our after,” Bardy said.



The Pet Alliance of Greater Orlando holds a grand opening of its Downtown Cat Shelter, on Tuesday, September 27, 2022. The event comes about a year after the shelter’s prior facility was destroyed by a devastating fire that killed 17 cats.

Bardy said in addition to serving as an adoption center, the cat-only facility at 777 W. Central Blvd. will take in pets that owners have to surrender and will carry a trap and return program, which focuses on capturing feral cats, altering them to avoid reproduction and releasing them again.

Shelter operations are expected to run for about two years and then move to a new location on John Young Parkway. Bardy said the organization plans on opening the new space in 2024, transforming the newly inaugurated building into an affordable veterinary clinic for both dogs and cats.

“We want it to be a place where people can bring both dogs and cats for affordable veterinary care ... because that is something that we lost in the fire — our clinic,” Bardy said.

Shortly after the ribbon-cutting opening ceremony, Bardy said the cats at the facility would be removed and placed in their respective foster homes ahead of [Hurricane Ian](#).

Orlando mayor Buddy Dyer attended the event and praised the growth of the organization since last year.

"I think the inspiring thing is how the community rallied to help take care of the pets and then to help rebuild, so this is a great day," Dyer said.

Dyer also acknowledged the efforts of the organization to shelter the animals and addressed concerns about Ian's potential impact in Central Florida.

"Get prepared and if you own animals, make sure that you have a plan for them as well because they're probably going to need to be indoors for a considerable amount of time over the course of the next three days," Dyer said.



The Pet Alliance of Greater Orlando holds a grand opening of its Downtown Cat Shelter, on Tuesday, September 27, 2022. The 3,000-square-foot Downtown Cat Shelter will house around 30 cats at a time and provide take in owner-surrendered cats.

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Rodney Purvis, community outreach manager at Pet Alliance, said the fire had a long-lasting effect on employees, many of whom left the organization because they faced relocation, longer commutes and emotional distress.

"We all still deal with it daily, little things set you off, you know," Purvis said.

Purvis said staff went from around 17 people to only six at the new shelter. Many of those who stayed have gotten tattoos to commemorate their loss.

Assistant Shelter Manager Kallie Wiese is one of the employees who decided to stay despite the difficulty of overcoming that night.

“I don’t think I am done with it, I am excited to see where things go and we have a lot of opportunity here with the area that we’re in,” Wiese said. “We can help a lot of people, for me it’s just the excitement of where we can go from here.”

Wiese has a tattoo on her arm showcasing the number 2727, the address of the last shelter, inside an arrow and the date 9.15.21 with little paws to each side.

Peterson also has a tattoo to honor that day: A straight line that extends through her forearm featuring the coordinates of the last location, the date of the fire and half faces of a dog and a cat.

She said that after the fire scattered the shelter’s community, coming back together to start over has returned a sense of hope.

“We all just got dispersed, you know, being able to come back for the community, for us and the animals [has] been great,” Peterson said.



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