

Couple comes to the rescue of the 'underdogs' of abandoned pets.

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The rat pack

Renee and Luna Foxx aren't bothered by the rats flitting around their feet, and they don't jump when the rodents crawl onto their furniture _ or into their laps.

The two stay as relaxed as ever, slouching on their sofa in T-shirts and baggy jeans and looking on with indulgent half-smiles.

"This house," Renee admits, "is definitely run by the rats."

It might, just possibly, be an understatement.

In the Pemberton Township home owned by the women _ who are domestic partners _ rats fill the cages that line the living room walls and more of the creatures amble across the floor. Both bedrooms have been given over entirely to rodents. In all, there are about 200 rats scurrying around the place or resting quietly in cages _ a quarter of them pets and the rest waiting for new homes.

It's been seven years since the Foxxes devoted themselves to adopting out rats, letting their free-lance writing careers, their savings accounts and their comfort _ they sleep on their pullout couch so the animals can have the bedrooms _ take a back seat to the effort, Rattamuffin Reskue.

Through the organization, which they are in the midst of registering as a nonprofit agency, the two take in homeless domestic rats, usually after people buy them in pet stores and then lose interest in them.

They also do bigger rescues such as a November effort in Jersey City, during which they took about 170 rats from a woman who called asking for their help.

"Her apartment was infested with cockroaches," Luna says, "and the rats were hoarded together in cages with insects swarming and crawling all over them. She called us because she said she was having landlord-tenant issues and needed to cut her number of rats."

Their goal, the Foxxes say, is to socialize the rats, get them veterinary care and keep them healthy and clean while using their Web site (www.Rattamuffinreskue.org) _ in combination with adoption days _ to find the animals new homes.

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They're not breaking any rules by having such a large collection of animals in their home, they say, and animal control officer Deborah Luker confirms that _ with the exception of dogs _ Pemberton Township doesn't restrict the number of pets residents can have.

"Last year alone we placed 500 (rats)," Renee says. "We've placed about 1,400 altogether."

When rats show up that will never become adoptable _ like a couple of wild ones that arrived recently, or the two that came from a science lab _ they are welcomed as permanent family members by the pale partners who seem to mirror each other with their petite frames, pierced bottom lips and soft, expressionless voices.

"Jolie was injected with cancer; her eyes were used for chemicals and they were burned out," Renee recalls of one of the lab rats. "We had three surgeries to save her life, but the cancer spread too much. Her sister is here. She had razors tested on her, so she has no tail, just a stump."

Renee, 26, first met someone with a pet rat when she was 11. She got one of her own a year or two later.

By the time she met Luna, she was actively rescuing the animals and had about 50.

It was enough to keep her own relatives from wanting to visit her at home, but it didn't faze the woman who would eventually become her domestic partner.

"I had friends that had pet rats, but I didn't know at the time that there were so many varieties, colors and coat types," says Luna, 27. "When I met Renee, she had a variety of rats, so my horizons were broadened."

Coming to the rescue of the ones that had been abandoned or neglected appealed to her, Luna adds.

"Rats are like the underdog," she says. "Who thinks of rescuing rats?"

The answer, she's discovered, is a special few.

While other rat adoption groups exist, Luna says, Rattamuffin may be the only one in New Jersey that caters to the creatures that are smart enough to be litter trained, learn their names and come when called.

Which is not to say that there isn't a rat-enthusiast culture out there; you just have to look for it, the Foxxes say.

A taste of it is available on the MSN Internet forum, Loving Rats, that the couple run. On the invitation-only forum that includes photo albums, the women and two assistant managers answer questions and host discussions for the 400 members who hail not only from the United States but also from Australia, England and Canada.

In addition, the Northeast offers at least one annual event that celebrates the rat passion. Called Rodent Fest, it was most recently held on April 9 in Maryland, where the Foxxes traveled to adopt out some of their animals.

The pair also were invited to participate in a recent adoption day at PETCO in Milltown, the store confirmed.

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But in general, the partners say, the phenomenon has yet to surface on most people's radar screens.

"The rat world is much bigger than everybody believes it is," Renee says, "but there's still a stigma."

Although, if you ask the couple, there shouldn't be.

"It's something we try to educate people about," Luna says. "Most of the time (their response) is very positive. They can't get over the fact that a rat is so friendly and affectionate."

People tend to overlook that quality if their only knowledge of rats comes from seeing them skittering across New York City subway tracks, says the veterinarian who treats the Foxxes' animals, Dr. Ella Marie McRae of Banfield animal hospital in Woodbridge.

But as long as domestic rats are healthy and well cared for, McRae says, there's no reason to believe they're dirtier than other pets, or that they carry disease.

And the rodents can certainly be nice, the vet says.

"Rats are less likely to bite people's kids than a gerbil or hamster, and they're a lot smarter," she says. "They'll crawl on the back of your arm and take things from your hand. They're really cute if they're well socialized."

Often, the people most able to appreciate that are children, the Foxxes say. It's the reason they run an after-school volunteer program that allows youngsters to help care for and socialize the rescue's rats.

"Children are open to everything," Luna says. "A lot of our adoptees are children who are in Boy and Girl Scouts or 4-H. They bring rats adopted from us to their clubs and explain what great pets they make."

Often those youngsters — or the Foxxes, who love to bring rats with them to public places — will turn rat-o-phobes into converts.

And once people have accepted that the rodents make great pets, it's usually not long before they become addicted to taking the creatures home, say some of the enthusiasts who regularly adopt from the Foxxes.

Because rats are extremely social among their own kind, the Foxxes insist that anyone adopting take home two _ both the same gender, so they won't reproduce. But many adopters find it difficult not to take even more of the critters, which usually live two or three years.

"It's hard to choose," says Jennifer Hudson, who, with her daughter, Victoria, has 14 rats, most of them adopted from the Foxxes.

"It's like going shoe shopping," continues Hudson of Abington, Pa. "You go for a pair of black pumps and then you say, 'I like these and these _ Oh, I'll take them all.' "

"And it's cheaper," laughs Cynthia Girard of Monmouth County, who has adopted 11 rats from the couple.

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But as much as people want them, the Foxxes won't give rats to just anyone.

To make sure adopters aren't buying rats as snake food, the pair charge \$15 per rodent, money that goes back into their organization. They also ask each adopter to sign a contract promising that the rats will receive proper care and not be abandoned.

And that's only part of their job.

The Foxxes also spend time with the rats, make their own mix of food for the animals and administer basic medical treatments. They clean every cage daily and vacuum frequently _ a plan that pays off as much for visitors as for the rats, because it keeps the house odor-free.

Together, those efforts take all the couple's time _ and most of their money. In March, the two say, they spent \$1,100 on veterinary bills alone.

The women try to defray those costs by accepting donations of money and cages and selling rat supplies and rat-themed candy, soap and candles.

It doesn't make much of a dent in their bills, but the pair say they have no intention of letting expenses stand in the way of their efforts.

Saving rats is what they care about most and they plan to keep doing it day and night, they say, even waking up periodically in the wee hours of the morning to check e-mails from potential adopters.

They do eventually sleep, the two say, but even then they remain immersed in their work.

"We do have a rat or two occasionally run across the bed or crawl up into the covers," Renee says, "and upon waking in the morning, we will find them snuggled next to us or between us, sleeping soundly."

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