

## The Challenges of Locating and Rescuing 'Fire Cats'

Shannon Jay, a retired police officer, experienced the nightmare of losing a pet when his indoor-only cat escaped and went missing for 13 days and nights. And then the California wild fires struck. A true Game Changer featured in the documentary 'Fire Cats,' Jay has become the cat rescue hero.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Today's Pet Game Changer is Shannon Jay, a former law enforcement officer turned rescuer of lost, displaced, and injured cats, especially "fire cats"
- When Shannon's indoor-only cat escaped one day six years ago, in the following "13 days and nights of living hell," he learned a whole lot about what it takes to find a missing cat
- Shannon lives in Northern California, an area of the U.S. that has experienced devastating wildfires in recent years; now retired from the police force, he works full time applying the skills he learned finding his own cat to the rescue of feline victims of wildfires
- Shannon also helps train other rescuers on how to find and save lost, displaced cats, especially fire cats

My guest today is animal rescuer Shannon Jay, who was nominated for a Game Changer award by Susan E. Shannon has a very interesting history, and I asked him to talk about how he found his passion in rescue work.

### Lost-and-Found Pet Sparks Second Career Saving Fire Cats

*"I'm a retired police officer," Shannon explains. "I spent over three decades of my life as a law enforcement officer and retired about two years ago. About six years ago, one of my indoor-only cats got out of the house, and it was quite a learning experience over the next 13 days and nights of living hell to get him back. I learned a lot during that process.*

*I live in Northern California, and about a year later in November 2017, the most destructive wildfire in the state's history — the Tubbs Fire of Sonoma County — burned through my community. It destroyed about 6,000 homes, and I knew there were going to be hundreds or even thousands of displaced, injured, and lost cats.*

*I told my girlfriend, Heather, that we needed to get involved. At the time, I was also happened to be on light duty after a medical procedure. We jumped in on that fire in 2017 and I spent about 800 hours of boots-on-the-ground work inside the burn zone searching for and rescuing what I called 'fire cats'."*

Interestingly, Shannon was contacted by a documentary filmmaker in the aftermath of the fire about his work. A year later, the documentary **The Fire Cats** was in post-production when the “mother of all wildfires,” the Camp Fire, tore through the Sierra Nevada mountain town of Paradise, CA.

*“I deployed into that fire five days later,” Shannon explains, “and spent over 1,000 hours rescuing displaced, lost, and injured family felines. Since then, I’ve spent about 4,000 hours of my life inside wildfire burn zones and an additional 2,000 hours looking for and searching for non-fire related lost and displaced cats.”*

## **Desperate Times Call for Desperate (Cutting Edge) Measures**

I asked Shannon if he’s inspired others around him to join his lifesaving mission.

*“In the aftermath of the first big fire and then subsequent wildfire deployments in the western U.S.,” says Shannon, “I was asked to deliver sort of a learning lecture and demonstrations on my rescue work and how I go about finding and saving lost, displaced cats, and fire cats in particular.*

*Since then, I’ve provided the same 2-to-2.5-hour presentation to hundreds of people online to help them learn how to do what I do.*

*I’m just one person as you pointed out, and I’ve always been sort of a lone wolf when it comes to this kind of work. But I’ve worked with other groups over the years during some of the big fires, Alley Cat Allies out of New York City and some other groups.*

*It’s important to me that knowledge is shared, and when it comes to saving these animals’ lives, I have no secrets. I will help people try to figure this out anytime, anyplace.*

*I get contacted several times a week regarding lost and displaced felines on my Facebook page and help people wherever I can, because knowledge is power and saving lives is everything.”*

Since the cats Shannon rescues in burn areas aren’t just lost or displaced, but often also have life-threatening injuries, I asked if he gets help from local veterinarians. He explains that the scale and scope of the Camp Fire triggered a very broad veterinary response.

*“In that fire, 15,000 homes were burned to the ground, an entire city wiped off the map, approximately 85 human souls lost, and thousands and thousands of injured, burned, displaced animals,” Shannon says.*

*“One of the finest veterinary schools/hospitals in the nation is UC Davis, which happens to be about two hours’ drive to the south. Even though I didn’t have a lot of direct contact with UC Davis regarding their burn patients, they took on the brunt along with regional veterinary centers.*

*I arrived in the area on day five and we were pulling burn patients out all day, every day. We witnessed a quite interesting evolution in animal burn care, because a lot of animal hospitals and veterinary schools don’t see a lot of burn patients. Thankfully, they just aren’t that common.*

*The team at UC Davis experimented and developed cutting-edge treatments. They really thought outside the box as far as burn patient care, wound healing, and pain management. Throughout the six or eight months I was on site there, it was quite amazing to hear some of the stories of the magic they worked with the hundreds of burn patients they received, along with the other hospitals.*

*They all collaborated to help each other on things like tilapia fish skin grafts, fentanyl micro-dosing, and all kinds of other treatments. It was pretty incredible."*

## **Beacons of Hope in a Sea of Darkness**

I asked Shannon what he loves most about his work.

*"Most of the rescue work I've done over these past few years has related directly to wildfires," he replies, "and I've been able to return hundreds of fire cats back to their families. These families are devastated. They've lost everything. They're swimming in a sea of darkness, emotionally.*

*They believe a beloved member of their family has been lost to a wildfire, and when you're able to bring that animal back home to them, the cat becomes a beacon of hope in that sea of darkness.*

*I love to see their faces change when the family members they thought were gone forever, are not. The look on their faces is priceless. I still correspond with many of those people to this day to check in on their little family members that I was able to bring home to them.*

*To me, that's everything. To anybody who's lost an animal, having that pet home again is everything, and especially in the case of families who've lost literally everything else."*

For many of these families, having a pet back who managed to live through the trauma of a wildfire and came out the other end, can help them pull their lives back together in almost supernatural ways.

## **The Feline Will to Live Is Like No Other**

I asked Shannon what kind of lost-and-found network was involved in helping lost cats find their way back to their families.

*"That's a great question, Dr. Becker," he replies. "I know from my first involvement in 2017 with the Tubbs Fire here in Sonoma County, that many people jumped right in and started building databases and social media pages, most notably on Facebook. It provided a way for families to report missing pets.*

*When they were able to provide addresses, information on the animal, and photographs most importantly, those of us in the field went out and checked oftentimes burned or destroyed properties knowing that a certain cat, or several, had lived at the address.*

*That's where the search started. The cats who survive are almost always found very close to or right at their homes, whether or not it's still standing."*

I think it's wonderful that a retired police officer became another sort of detective in retirement! Finally, I asked Shannon what one thing he would like the world to know about the work he does.

*"I've been asked that question a number of times over the years," he replies, "and I'll tell you this, Dr. Becker. I've spent thousands of hours in the field, almost all of it at night, observing and living among displaced, often injured, frightened, scared, lost cats. I've learned so much about them.*

*For one thing, their behaviors change dramatically when they're displaced from home. But the most important thing I've learned — you used the word supernatural a moment ago so I'm going to expand on it — is that what these animals are capable of enduring is otherworldly.*

*When it comes to staying on this Earth, I've not seen an animal with a will to live stronger than a feline. I tell people, 'Don't ever bet against a cat, because you'll probably lose.' When it comes to fighting to survive, a cat will fight like the third monkey on the ramp to Noah's Ark and it's raining outside."*

Obviously, in addition to being a pet detective, Shannon is also a cat behaviorist! I agree with him — cats are incredible warriors and survivors. And thank God they have angels like Shannon and his network doing the hard work of helping to rescue and heal them and bring them home to loving families.

If you'd like to check in with Shannon, learn more about him, and follow his work, you'll find him on **Facebook**.

*"Of all the years I've done this, I have probably written, well, at least several volumes' worth of books of material," he explains. "I've chronicled pretty much all my rescues over the last six years. All those stories can be found on my Facebook page. I have so much material that I've also started writing a book. So, anybody wants to know or contact me, Facebook is the place to do it. I'm always available."*

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