

# san diego pets

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# FEATURE



**Photo by Nicole Sours Larson**

Henry the three-legged cat enjoys resting in his outdoor kitty "condo" on the deck of the La Jolla home he shares with his rescuers, Cathy Conheim and Donna Brooks, and his sister, poodle Dollydog. Henry's condo and cat tree were designed by architect Rob Fender, who used charred manzanita branches from his Julian home destroyed in the 2003 Cedar Fire.





# Henry the three-legged cat's 'Just Me Project' extends his healing paw to children and wounded veterans

STORY AND PHOTOS BY NICOLE SOURS LARSON | SAN DIEGO PETS

A homeless mountain kitten, Henry was taken in by a family staying with Cathy Conheim and Donna Brooks at their Julian home after the family was burnt out by the Cedar Fire. When he showed up with a dangerously dangling left front leg and needed an emergency amputation, no one would have imagined the transformative effect he would have on so many lives.

Conheim and Brooks, confirmed dog lovers, had not planned to adopt Henry, but he came into their lives at a time of great loss and grief. Henry, like many pets, filled an unrealized void. Kind-hearted animal lovers, rather than euthanize the trusting kitten they chose to pay for Henry's life-saving surgery and promised to find him an indoor home. Henry rapidly wormed his way into their respect and affections and inspired them to publish his story to benefit other injured and disadvantaged animals.

Now, having raised more than \$50,000 in four years through sales of his books and other publications to support animals and animal welfare organizations, Henry has become spokescat for a new crusade, partnering with his poodle sister, Dollydog.

Henry's Just Me Project taps into the powerful human-animal bond to extend the three-legged cat's healing message of overcoming obstacles to help both ailing children and their siblings as well as wounded war veterans and

their families.

Conheim, a psychotherapist and Henry's "cat scribe," and Brooks, a retired physician, thought they disliked, even hated, cats until Henry took over their lives. The La Jolla residents began to comprehend the power of Henry's story once they received an overwhelming response to Conheim's initial email sent to 20 of their friends detailing the indomitable kitten's tale of survival and triumph. That email boomeranged around the world.

Henry, they realized, is a "therapist" and has many lessons to teach humans about healing trauma through storytelling as well as about transforming bias into tolerance and pain, grief and anger into healing and recovery.

"He's here to teach us how to deal with our misfortunes. All of us have problems, but Henry says you can't be defined by them. You're defined by your response to your problems. You play the paw that's dealt you, this cat says," Conheim says.

Henry's story appeals to adults and children alike. As his first book began to be used as a healing tool in both children's and veterans' hospitals, Conheim saw the potential for a children's book which could teach about "tolerance, survival, courage, perseverance and triumph over barriers and bias."

"What's the Matter with Henry?" which Conheim wrote





Cathy Conheim with Henry puppet prototype

with children's author BJ Gallagher, appeared in 2006 and was quickly adopted by First Book, a national literacy non-profit organization that fell in love with his mission. They distributed thousands of copies of "What's the Matter with Henry?" to children in the Gulf Coast area displaced by Hurricane Katrina and to children of military families dealing with war and deployment-related emotional and physical trauma.

The positive response to "What's the Matter with Henry?" prompted Conheim, working with Heather Wood Ion, to develop the Just Me Project to reach out to "the littlest warriors" and their families, as well as to families of chronically ill or injured children also impacted by stress or trauma.

"Henry wants to help teach children how to express their emotions because he's learnt from his moms that dangerous things can happen from unexpressed emotions – physical distress, depression, anger, violence, road rage. Henry legitimizes the conversation to

open the door of how to deal with disappointments, tragedies, challenges, whatever life throws you," Conheim explains.

As part of the Just Me Project, Conheim and managing director Wood Ion developed "Henry's Kibble for Thought: A Homework Guide for Humans," in which Henry teaches five important lessons fostering healing, recovery and self-esteem.

"The Just Me Project is about building resilience and creating a positive vocabulary about capability instead of disability. We know that reframing our perceptions is the first step towards building resilience," says Wood Ion.

Henry's role in healing builds upon the trust and openness that people display when talking to innocent animals and pets.

"Let's access that area of trust, engagement and warmth that we use in talking with our pets," she adds.

Thanks to generous grants from the Whiteman Foundation and an anonymous donor, the Just Me Project has

been able to distribute 3,000 healing kits, which include "What's the Matter with Henry?" and "Henry's Kibble for Thought" workbook, through military family outreach at Camp Pendleton and through Fisher Houses at military bases.

Next up for both Conheim and the Just Me Project is a new book centered on Dollydog, "What About Me?" which addresses the emotional issues experienced by the healthy siblings of chronically ill children who often feel invisible and forgotten. As a result, they are more likely to develop behavioral problems, as Dollydog did when the injured Henry invaded her home.

"That book is targeted at children who have a sibling or parent who has a greater need. It gives credibility to feelings that don't usually have a voice," Conheim explains.

Henry continues his efforts to help other animals and animal welfare organizations. He sells all of his publications at cost to any individuals or animal welfare organizations who wish to resell them to benefit animals in need.

To purchase Henry's books and other publications and read more about the Just Me Project and Henry's early history and adventures, visit his website at [www.henrysworld.org](http://www.henrysworld.org).



Dollydog, a standard French poodle, enjoys sitting on the sofa of her art-filled La Jolla home, where she was an only pet until an injured and recovering Henry moved in and stole the spotlight.