

Virtual Pet Therapy

By Sandy Robins

Henry, the three-legged cat, gains new ground as the first online therapy pet.

Therapy pets dispense love and companionship to lonely or hurting people. A three-legged tabby named Henry took pet-therapy to new heights by reaching out to people internationally via the Internet, as a virtual pet therapist.

HENRY'S NEW HOME

Retired psychotherapist Cathy Conheim and her friend Donna Brooks found Henry on the doorstep of their La Jolla, Calif., home. His left front leg dangled uselessly from his shoulder. They rushed Henry to the veterinarian to learn that the leg had to be amputated to save his life.

"When we found him, we were life-long dog lovers who didn't like cats," Conheim says. "He simply rejected our initial negative attitude and further refused to be limited by the loss of his leg. His courage and perseverance to be a normal, curious cat and to be loved by us was truly amazing. He also befriended our feline-resisting pool named Dolly."

LIFE-CHANGING WORK

Conheim sent a casual email to 20 friends telling Henry's remarkable tale from his perspective. Little did she realize that the recipients would forward the email to other cat lovers until the power of the Internet took over and Conheim found herself corresponding with people from all over the world.



Henry with one of his many friends, who brought this picture to school to show off that he knew a celebrity.

"People sign their correspondence to Henry from their own pets," says Conheim, who has answered more than 12,000 emails to date. Some mail even came from soldiers who lost limbs during a tour-of-duty in Iraq and other amputees from around the world.

"For [people who have] suffered a loss in their lives or are ill, sometimes it's easier to relate to an animal that's dealt with adversity. I am amazed at the speed in which strangers are opening up to [Henry] on a very deep level and experiencing profound changes in their lives. As a psychotherapist I would be bound by the limitations of my profession, such as weekly 45-minute sessions. If I asked questions with such directness, I would appear to be mocking. Animals have innocence

and Henry uses this to achieve what he does. He is helping people understand that we aren't shaped by our misfortunes but by our responses to them."

Conheim compiled many of the emails into a book called "Henry's World" and followed it with a second book called "What's the Matter with Henry?" All proceeds go to Henry's other amazing goal — to raise \$1 million to help animals anywhere in the world.

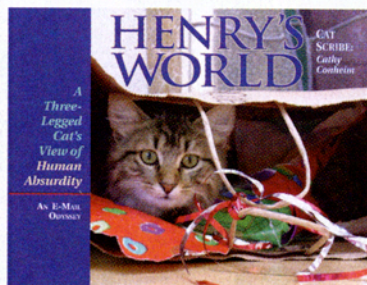
For more information or to write to Henry, go to www.henryworld.org. ○



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATHY CONHEIM

Henry the therapy cat is ready to heal.

Sandy Robins is an award-winning, multi-media pet-lifestyle expert. She is a popular TV and radio guest, and her work appears regularly on MSNBC.com and in various national and international publications. She is an obsessed pet parent to cats named Cali and Fudge. Read more about her at SandyRobinsOnline.com.



Left: Henry's first book, accompanied by a CD of original music, is in its second edition and has sold more than 4,000 copies.



Right: His second book is in its third edition and has sold more than 9,000 copies.