

# Making Life Meaningful

Robin O'Brien Sofge

Virginia resident Siri Zwemke had a passion for cats, especially the Abyssinian Siamese. In her quest to find this type of cat for a personal pet, she called a unique rescue shelter specializing in Siamese cats over 1,000 miles away in Topeka, KS, to see if any were available for adoption. She had no idea this call would be a catalyst, changing her life forever both professionally and personally. But soon she felt an urge to find out if Siamese cats closer to home also needed rescuing.

"As soon as the words come out of your mouth (that you are interested in rescuing Siamese cats), you get calls," Zwemke, a former teacher, said with a laugh. "I found a niche that needed to be filled." Today, she is executive director of the Siamese Cat Rescue Center which has over 700 volunteers and operates in 20 states. The Center has rescued more than 2,309 Siamese cats over the past six years. Foster homes house many of the cats, but there is also a facility for them nestled in the Blue Ridge foothills. The group is supported through donations and grants.

Zwemke is among the many blessed people who have found the secret to making life meaningful.

For a successful professional, juggling meetings and 401k plans, a stay-at-home mom managing diapers and feedings, or a senior citizen, looking toward retirement, life is full of physical, emotional and financial demands. And so most of us are looking for more joy in our lives. As the holidays approach, many of us feel a need to make life more meaningful. Some experts, with professional or personal experience, who have uncovered the keys to making life more fulfilling have shared their advice.

For Zwemke, being proactive about her passion for Siamese cats has been fulfilling. Although she has seen the dark side of pet ownership, Zwemke gets great satisfaction from the rescue work which she does with her husband, Darrell, whom she met coincidentally when starting the paperwork trail for her organization to become a nonprofit. Darrell, a Salt Lake City resident at the time, had started a Siamese Internet Cat Club. "It's renewed our faith in the human race," she said about their nonprofit. "The number of compassionate people we've met as volunteers and adopt-



ers is heartwarming. You get rejuvenated by how many people are out there."

## Take Risks

Twice a year, scores of women, from age 18 to senior citizen, in all shapes and sizes, gather at Audrey Moore Recreation Center's Wakefield Park in Annandale, VA, for the 12-week Beginning Fitness Program offered by Washington RunHers, a club to promote women's running in the Washington, D.C. area. The goal is for all participants to be able to complete a 5k race at the end of the program. The cost of the program is nominal.

"We've had a lot of women who suffered strokes who are just getting back into working out. Others are breast cancer survivors," said Beginning Fitness and Big 10 program coach Carla Gregor, a lupus survivor. The group, she said, has a wide range of participants including stay-at-home-moms who've just had babies, dieticians, lawyers, pediatricians and police officers.

"It's awesome," Gregor said. "I have women call me on the phone before the program starts

saying, 'I'm overweight. I haven't exercised in 10 years.' I say, 'You'll be fine.'... We're all females running. It's not competitive. Everyone cheers everyone on."

For the past three years, Gregor, a coach for the 12-week program, has inspired women with motivational emails each week. For example, her email to participants before the race last session said, "Hello Athletes... Are you starting to realize that YOU will be able to run the Kingstowne 5K? You are doing so well with your training..."

Available by phone at home, work or via email, Gregor is known for her hard work, individual encouragement and fun, like the time she had runners run their first mile with a single potato chip in each hand to check their form. If they broke their chip, they needed to change their form. Several participants say the program has changed their lives;

one runner has even changed careers to work in the fitness industry. Many testimonials from members cite success in quitting smoking, losing weight and making lasting friendships. "That's why I keep coaching," Gregor said. "It is so fulfilling to see a female's confidence build."

## Be True To Yourself

Professional personal coach Anne Conlan of Change Mastery Personal Coaching works with clients dealing with career and life changes, and also does relationship coaching for both singles and couples. Her goal is to help people experience more balance, focus, clarity, fulfillment and joy in their lives. She says, "In the busy, hectic, sometimes frenetic lives that we live, we rarely slow down enough to check in with our inner spirit—the place that knows what we need and how to get those needs met."

Conlan invites *Washington Woman* readers to give themselves a holiday gift, by finding a quiet place to spend 30-60 minutes alone and ask themselves the following questions.

- ◆ What and whom do I value most in life and how do I consciously honor these gifts?
- ◆ What am I doing or who am I with when I am feeling most fulfilled and happy?
- ◆ If money were no object, how would I be spending my time in a meaningful way?
- ◆ What nurtures my spirit or inspires me?
- ◆ What are all the things in my life that I am grateful for?

"So often in looking for meaning and joy in life," says Conlan, "we keep knocking on a door that actually opens from the inside. This IS your life. Don't put off living it. Remember, work will wait while you watch a rainbow but the rainbow won't wait while you work."

#### **Friendship**

Robin McMahon, a licensed social worker and senior advisor for grief loss for Hospices of the National Capital Region, has some practical advice about making life meaningful.

"The grounding principle is to live in the present," she said. "We're always looking ahead or back and not at the moment we are in."

She highly recommends the book *The Precious Present*, by best-selling author, Spencer Johnson. "The points he makes have been reinforced with people I work with, i.e., living in the present and making it as good as it can be. So often, we're chasing dreams and not making the most of the moment." She said that at the end of life most people want to feel like they did what they needed to do.

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As Johnson noted in his book, McMahon believes friendships are critical. "Be choosy about friends. Pick friends who share a similar philosophy of life or similar values," she said. "Ask yourself, 'Is this someone who would be there for me if I needed her?' Of course, to have good friends you need to be a good friend. But sometimes people try to transform something that doesn't have potential."

She also agrees with Johnson that it is important to find mentors or role models who have found meaning in life. "Asking people what they would've done differently sometimes helps form a catalyst for your own life," McMahon said. "Another aspect is limiting your fan club. When we are trying to please or impress other people, we often neglect the people that mean the most to us in the process."

#### **Spirituality**

Reverend Eileen Goor of New World Unity Church in Springfield, VA, said, "Our lives are more meaningful when we trust our inner guidance and teach our children to do so too."

She stressed the importance of community. "It's not about dogma. Examples are a support system as people go through the loss of a spouse, parent or child," Goor said. "Sad times are easier to bear, and life is more joyful, with community."

She said her church focuses on conscious living. "We see a world that works for everyone," Goor said. "Making our lives more meaningful is doing things in a more conscientious way."

As the holiday season approaches, take some time to reflect on life. Do you feel fulfilled? If not, remember what the experts have said: Take risks, be true to yourself, make precious friendships, and trust your inner guidance. Your answers will come.

*Robin O'Brien Sofge is a freelance writer in Burke, VA.*