

# **Fire Cats: Rescuing Felines Displaced From Wildfires**

## **A Special Interview With Shannon Jay**

**By Dr. Karen Becker**

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so happy that Shannon Jay has been nominated for a Game Changer award. Susan nominated him, and he's joining us today to talk more about the amazing work he's doing and the animals that he's rescuing and we're getting a moment to connect with Shannon, live and in-person. Thank you so much for joining me, and congratulations on your Game Changer award, Shannon.

**Shannon Jay:**

Thank you, Dr. Becker. It's a privilege to be on your show this morning.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Shannon, for our listeners, readers, or viewers that aren't familiar with the amazing work that you're doing, will you back up and walk us through how you started rescuing animals? How you probably, I don't want to say, maybe you didn't set out to do this, but you like so many people that end up finding their passion in rescue, there's a good story behind why you do what you do.

**Shannon Jay:**

Okay. Well, firstly, I'm a retired police officer. I spent over three decades of my life as a law enforcement officer and retired about two years ago, and during that time, oh, about six years ago, I lost one of my indoor-only cats. We lost him, he got out of the house, and it was quite a learning experience over the 13 days and nights of living hell to get him back, and I learned a lot during that process. About a year later, I live in Northern California, where at the time, in November 2017, at the time it was the most destructive wildfire in California history came through my community.

I had learned a pretty good amount of information in my trials of trying to find and rescue my own cat over that two-week period, and when that fire came through it destroyed about 6,000 homes in my community. It was the biggest fire in California history, and I knew there were going to be hundreds and thousands of displaced, injured and lost felines, cats. And I told my girlfriend, Heather, at the time that, "We have to get involved in this." And I was on light duty from a medical procedure earlier. Of course, that's going to fall down. Oh, should I fix that right now?

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Actually, you're remarkably not back lit. I can still see your face beautifully. So, we're okay.

**Shannon Jay:**

Okay. It kind of looks artsy. All right. So, I jumped in on that fire, which was called the Tubbs Fire of Sonoma County 2017, and spent about 800 hours of boots-on-the-ground work inside that

burn zone searching for and rescuing what I called “fire cats.” And actually, I was contacted by a documentary filmmaker during the aftermath of that fire and my work, and “The Fire Cats” documentary film was born, and in post-production about a year after the Tubbs Fire, the mother of all wildfires and probably United States history tore through a Sierra Nevada mountain town. It was called the Camp Fire, and it happened in Paradise, California, and I deployed into that fire five days later and would spend over 1,000 hours in that fire rescuing displaced, lost and injured family felines. And since then, have spent about 4,000 hours of my life inside wildfire burn zones and an additional 2,000 hours looking for and searching for lost, displaced felines that were not fire-related.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Gosh, gosh. So, when you think back, Shannon, on out of you trying to find your own cat and then helping thousands of other people reconnect with their cats and then just trying to save the animals around you, have you been able to elicit a crew of volunteers to help? Are you now – is this a growing awareness campaign? Because you are an amazing human doing amazing thing, but you are an N-of-1. Have you been able to gather a tribe of people around you that are helping you in this incredible mission?

**Shannon Jay:**

Yeah, in the aftermath of the first big fire and then subsequent other wildfire deployments in the Western United States, I was tasked and requested to put on, well, I'm not sure if you'd call it a seminar or some sort of learning lecture and demonstrations on what it is that I have done and how I go about rescuing these lost, displaced cats, and fire cats in particular. And since then have provided that two to two-and-a-half-hour presentation to hundreds of people online to teach them how to do what I do.

Because as you mentioned, I'm just one person, and I've sort of always been a lone wolf when it comes to this kind of work, and I have 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. But again, to me, it's important that knowledge should be shared, and when it comes to saving these animals' lives, I have no secrets. I will help people try to figure this out anytime, any place. 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.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Gosh. Shannon, When it comes to wildfires where you've got animals not just lost and displaced, but life-threatening injuries, massive need for veterinary care, did you have veterinarians step in and help you? Talk to me a little bit about once you were able to identify this need, where did these animals go after you rescued them?

**Shannon Jay:**

Well, I can tell you a much grander, a much broader response came from the famous Paradise fire, and the scale and scope of that fire, it's indescribable. 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 and displaced animals. And of course, I focused on

the felines, but one of the finest veterinary schools/hospitals in the nation is UC Davis, which happened to be about two hours' drive to the south. And 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. Because I was there on day 5 and we were pulling burn patients out all day every day, and it was quite an interesting evolution, I should say, regarding animal burn care, because a lot of hospitals and vet schools, whatnot, a burned animal is not very common, unless you correct me. I just get that an animal burn patient is not common.

Well, UC Davis experimented and provided cutting-edge treatment and really thought outside the box as far as burn patient care, wound-healing and pain management. Throughout the course of the whole six, eight months that I was on site there, it was quite amazing to hear some of the stories of the magic they worked having this proving ground and learning curve, because they had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of burn patients, along with the other hospitals, and they all collaborated to help each other, the tilapia fish skin grafts, fentanyl micro-dosing for the burn patients and all that sort of stuff. It was pretty incredible.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, it is. I have written about UC Davis' amazing use of fish skin and other – I mean, they've had to come up with not just protocols that were highly effective, but also quickly, and then scale them mass, up to be able to provide thousands of protocols to acute patients, and they just did an amazing job. You being one of those blessed souls that went in and literally lifting animals out of the flames, it's this whole series of people doing everything they can within their sphere. You being that person on the ground physically saving cats, and then hospitals doing their jobs, it's really communities coming together on all fronts to help save these animals.

So, Shannon, when you think back about this career number two, after already serving for 30 years in terms of law enforcement, you have a brand-new passion and career. When you think about your work identifying lost, homeless, displaced cats, what fills your heart the most? What do you love most about this work that you're doing?

**Shannon Jay:**

Well, the vast majority of the work that I've done over these years related directly to wildfires, and over those years, I have rescued hundreds of fire cats and brought many of them back to their families. Now, these are families, for those of us who have never lost everything but the clothes on our back, these families are devastated. They have nothing. They're swimming in seas of darkness emotionally, and the idea that they believe that a beloved member of their family, a family feline, was lost to that fire and you bring that animal back home to those families, that cat becomes, that feline becomes a beacon of hope in these seas of darkness. And to watch the looks on their faces when they thought that one of their family members was gone forever is not. The look on their faces, and I still correspond with many of those families to this day to check in on their little family members that I was able to bring home to them, and to me, that's everything, especially to anybody who's lost an animal, to bring it back. And when you add on top that these are families that, literally, have nothing in their lives except themselves, it means a lot.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

It's huge, Shannon. It's huge, it's huge. You returning an animal that was thought to be dead to a family that has nothing becomes not just a beacon of hope, but animals pull families together in supernatural ways, and having an animal that has lived through that trauma and survived and come back is really a beautiful pivot for those devastated families. You brought that glue to help hold that unit together.

Shannon, there had to be some network then built in, because you've got all of these displaced kitties who can't tell you their address. Is there a lost-and-found network that you somehow set up? How were you able to knit some of these kitties to be able to find their mamas and dads?

**Shannon Jay:**

That's a great question, Dr. Becker. I know from my first involvement in 2017 at the Tubbs Fire here in Sonoma County, Northern California, numerous people jumped right in and started building these databases and built several social media pages, most notably Facebook, and started giving ways for families who've lost everything to call in, write in, and report their felines, their family pets missing. Then when they were able to provide address, information on the animal, photographs most notably, and we started putting those together and then we in the field would go out and start looking at these oftentimes burned or destroyed properties knowing that a certain type of feline or felines, a number of them, had lived at this address, and that's where we would start searching. Because in all the time I've done this, the animals, it's the felines that survive are almost always found very close to or right at their home, whether it exists or if it's burnt to the ground. They're there almost every time, and so-

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. Your detective work as an officer of the law, you have become a detective in retirement, in essence.

**Shannon Jay:**

I guess so, in a little bit of a sort of way. Yeah.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. What beautiful work you're doing. Shannon, if you were to want the world to know one thing about what you do, what would it be?

**Shannon Jay:**

Well, I've been asked that question a number of times over the years, and I'll tell you this, Dr. Becker. In all the work that I've done, literally spending thousands of hours in the field, almost all of it at night, and observing and living among these displaced, often injured, frightened, scared and lost felines, I have learned so much about them. Number one, their behaviors change dramatically when they're displaced from home, or lost, or their home is gone. But the most important thing I will tell people is in all the years I've done this, and you used the word "supernatural" a moment ago and I'm going to go ahead and add on to that, that what I have seen these animals capable of enduring is otherworldly.

When it comes to staying on this Earth, I have not seen an animal ever that has a will to live that is stronger than a feline. In the end, I tell people this, I'll say a couple things, and one of them

really hits home, and that is don't ever bet against a cat, because you'll probably lose. And the second one is, when it comes to fighting to survive and stay on this Earth, a cat will fight like the third monkey on the ramp to Noah's Ark and it's raining outside.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

That's good. You also, in addition to being pet detective, you can be a kitty behaviorist. I agree with your sentiments completely, cats are incredible warriors and survivors. They're incredible. Thank God they have angels on Earth like you doing the hard work of helping them be found and helping them be rescued. Their ability to come home is solely dictated by volunteers and beautiful humans who are willing to do the work to help find them and get them to safety, and that is what you have done. And Shannon, it is an amazing, beautiful thing that you are doing. I'm so thankful that Susan Ellis took the time to nominate you. Celebrating superheroes like yourself doing hard but incredibly important work is such a gift to all of our hearts that love animals, and recognizing that there are people like you out there in the world doing everything you can to save the animals around you locally, right where you're at, it's really reinvigorating to the human soul to meet amazing people like you.

So, thank you, Shannon, for everything you're doing and congratulations on your Game Changer Award. If people wanted to learn more about you or learn more about your mission, is there a way that you stay connected with people or are you a lone wolf enough that – some of our beautiful Game Changers are like, "I'm not on social media. I want nothing to do with that tech stuff, I'm just in my zone doing my thing." Do you have a way that people could learn more?

**Shannon Jay:**

I do, Dr. Becker. Of all the years I've done this, I have probably written, well, at least several volumes' worth of books of material as I have chronicled all of my rescues, pretty much all of them over the last six years. Some very crazy, dramatic ones, I've traveled out of state. All those chronicles, those reports, those stories are in my Facebook page, and that's the only place. I have a not very-active YouTube channel, but if somebody were merely to look my name up Shannon Jay, J-A-Y, on Facebook, then I have years and years' worth of reports that are actually helping me chronicle this journey that I've been on, and, actually, material for me that I have already started writing a book and will continue in that endeavor. So, anybody wants to know or contact me, Facebook is the place to do it, and I'm always available.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Shannon Jay, we are so thankful you are doing the amazing work that you are doing, we're so thankful that Susan Ellis took the time to submit your name. You are indeed a Game Changer. The animal world is blessed to have you in it, and we appreciate everything that you're doing. Thanks so much for spending some time with us this morning.

**Shannon Jay:**

Thank you, Dr. Becker. Thank you very much for your Game Changer awards and recognizing people for the things they do for the animals of the world.