

# BUCKS COUNTY Courier Times

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## Believing without seeing

By AMANDA CREGAN

Idgie sees everything.

The stocky, silver gray cat was born without eyes and has no concept of sight, but Idgie can see more than most, says owner Mary Shafer.

This cat's story is about much more than sight.

Plucked from the city streets barely alive and with little hope of finding anyone who would love her enough to take on her special needs, Idgie's story — now immortalized as part of a collection of essays — is about a special Thanksgiving miracle with some life lessons along the way.

### Coming home

The tiny kitten was on the brink of death. It was a boiling summer day when her feline mother abandoned her on a sidewalk in Philadelphia.

A sympathetic passer-by had to gently peel the cat from the pavement, since her leaking bodily fluids had cemented her little body to the sidewalk in the hot afternoon sun.

By the time the kitten was lucky enough to find herself in a pet adoption cage at a Petco in Philadelphia, employees didn't hold out much hope.

When Shafer's companion, Shelly Sickbert, first met the kitten in 2002, she was scampering across the floor and easily scooting around the aisle racks just as the store was due to close. The employees took pity on her and gave her a few moments of freedom, knowing she wouldn't have much left of her young life without an adoptive owner.

The little cat wasn't much to look at.

Instead of fur, she had patches of gray peach fuzz where the veterinarian had shaved her entire body to combat the maggots that had burrowed into her skin. Her belly looked hollow and distorted from the worms that had ravaged her intestines.

But her most notable feature was the tiny flaps of skin sealing the holes where her eyes should have been.

In this sad little kitten, Sickbert saw life.

The kitten bounded around the store with limitless energy and no concept of her disability. She didn't move cautiously. She didn't fear that she might bump into something and hurt herself.

Already beaten by life and with every reason to be afraid, the little cat blindly turned each corner without hesitation, using only her ears, nose and whiskers as extra-sensory sonar to navigate her environment.

With a quick call to Shafer, the little infested cat with no eyes and almost no fur came home that night and the couple has never looked back.

### **Thanksgiving miracle**

It was love at first sight for Shafer, who chose to name the new family member “Idgie” after a gutsy female character from the movie “Fried Green Tomatoes.”

A first visit to the veterinarian brought even more bad news for Idgie. She had tested positive for feline leukemia. An eventual death sentence for a cat, the disease is comparable to terminal cancer in humans.

Idgie wasn't expected to live too much longer. It was crushing news that meant Idgie had to be quarantined from their other three cats to prevent the disease from spreading.

So Idgie took up residence in Shafer's office.

Shafer, 47, is a freelance writer and publisher. She spends most of her day in her home office in the pre-Civil War house she and Sickbert share in Nockamixon.

As the months passed, the sick little kitten grew into a healthy cat. Shafer gave her daily nutritional supplements prescribed by the vet to try to reverse some of the damage already done to her body.

Her peach fuzz turned into a shiny, long-haired silver coat with a full tail and a snow white chest and front paws. Shafer and Idgie bonded. As Shafer worked in her office day after day, she felt captivated by Idgie's spirit.

“It just made me realize how precious life could be and how sacred it is,” said Shafer. “I just began to feel like she's been entrusted to me.”

Shafer felt the cat wasn't terminally ill, despite the test results. Idgie seemed too full of life to be sick. So, against the advice of the vet, who told her there was no scientifically documented cured case of feline leukemia, Mary pushed for a second blood test.

The phone call came the day before Thanksgiving.

“Miracles do happen,” Dr. Ellen Prieto told Mary, not even pausing to say hello.

Shafer and Sickbert were overjoyed with the news. Idgie had again done the impossible.

Prieto went on to document her findings in a veterinary medical journal as the first empirical data supporting the use of supplements to reverse feline leukemia.

“We knew that this was going to be the best Thanksgiving ever and it really was,” said Shafer. “It really set the tone for the whole holiday season.”

### **Learning to leap**

Shafer has learned a lot from watching Idgie, who now enjoys the freedom to roam the house.

She watches Idgie leap from the highest of heights without hesitation, trusting the ground will be there without ever seeing it. Maybe that's something we can all learn from Idgie, says Shafer.

“It's about having faith and believing things are going to be good,” said Shafer. “Does she sometimes hit things on the way down? Yeah, she gets hurt, but it doesn't stop her. She has faith that she's going to be OK.”

Her experience with Idgie moved Shafer to compile a book of essays written by authors around the world who have also been inspired by pets with disabilities.

“Almost Perfect: Disabled Pets and the People Who Love Them” is sold on Amazon.com and just got picked up by Target.

Shafer hopes their stories will change how people see disabilities.

“I think these animals are a lot less aware of their so-called handicap than we are,” she said.

Shafer says she's frustrated when people's first reaction to her blind cat is, “Oh, poor Idgie!”

“She's very happy and her life is very full. She doesn't know she's missing anything,” said Shafer. “I really wanted people to stop seeing the disability first. I imagine that's how parents who have kids like that feel.”

On this Thanksgiving, Shafer remembers the special holiday miracle that made her even more thankful for Idgie's life and spirit.

“She has shown me what it means to be fearless and have faith.”

***For More Info***

“Almost Perfect: Disabled Pets and the People Who Love Them” edited by Mary Shafer is available at [www.AlmostPerfectBook.com](http://www.AlmostPerfectBook.com).

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