Shelter volunteer is a hero to many

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By **JONNELLE DAVIS**
Staff Writer

REIDSVILLE — Ashley Nickelston didn't plan on taking a kitten home when she visited Reidsville Veterinary Hospital on Friday morning.

Nickelston's golden retriever just delivered a litter of eight puppies. But once a veterinarian showed her a group of kittens that had been stolen from — and later returned to — the Rockingham County Animal Shelter, Nickelston couldn't resist.

"It broke my heart," she said. "If I didn't have all the puppies, I would have taken more home."

The adoption fee for Nickelston's new kitten was already paid, thanks to Edward McIrvin , a volunteer at the shelter.

McIrvin, who faces charges for breaking into the shelter this week and stealing 37 cats, paid the veterinary hospital $5,800 to board the cats for one week.

File photo (News & Record)

Cats play at the Rockingham County Animal Shelter.

The money also covers the adoption fee, spaying and neutering for anyone who adopts one of the cats.

As of late Friday, eight of the felines had been adopted, and veterinary staff said there was a line of others waiting to adopt.

McIrvin, who said he plans to turn himself in to Reidsville police on Monday, is working to find homes for the cats, too.

"If I go to jail, I hope the cats are saved before then," he said.

'A lot of people's hero'

WANT TO ADOPT?

Visit Reidsville Veterinary Hospital at 1401 W. Harrison St. in Reidsville. The adoption fee, spay and neuter surgery costs, and the first set of vaccinations have been covered by Edward McIrvin's donation. The hospital is accepting donations toward boarding expenses for the cats. For more information, call 349-3194.

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Kathe Nagy, office manager at Reidsville Veterinary Hospital, said the hospital did not want to press charges against McIrvin, but had no choice. Rockingham County contracts with the hospital for shelter space, and the cats are county property.

"He did the wrong thing but for a good reason," Nagy said. "He has a very good heart. He's a lot of people's hero right now."

McIrvin said Thursday he took the cats because he feared they would be euthanized. He housed them temporarily in a Greensboro office and planned to foster them.

Nagy said many of them had overstayed the 72-hour mandatory hold period and would have been euthanized Tuesday. A total of 23 cats and 14 dogs were euthanized that day, she said.

The cats have been spared — at least for now.

As Nickelston completed the paperwork to take her new kitten home, Nagy cuddled it. The tan and white kitten was visibly shaking in her hands.

Housed in two back rooms were more of its kind: male and female, all colors, 4 weeks old to adult. Some eagerly approached the front of their cages at the sight of a new face, paws outstretched. Others shied away. Most are strays that were brought to the shelter by animal control officers.

"They've been through a lot," Nagy said.

Sue Haney stopped by Friday afternoon on her way home to Greensboro and adopted an 8-week-old calico. She also wrote a $100 check to help with boarding fees.

Haney named the cat Edwina, in honor of its savior, Edward.

Director's job in limbo

The animal shelter's director, René Jackson, said she was fired this week after being accused of assisting McIrvin in the theft.

Nagy said Friday although she did ask Jackson to turn in her keys, she is still evaluating the position. The shelter director works for the veterinary hospital. Jackson would be the second director fired this year.

For now, the clinic's kennel staff is overseeing the shelter, Nagy said.

Jackson thinks her tendency to hold animals much longer than the 72-hour period may have gotten her in trouble.

Nagy said the director's job is a tough one, but the shelter is small and cannot house the number of animals brought in each day. Cats are a particular problem.

"Sometimes we have 40 a week brought in," Nagy said.

The veterinary hospital is moving and won't house shelter animals at its new location. The county has plans to build a new shelter in Wentworth.

County officials said this week recent problems at the shelter underscore the need for a new one. About $100,000 in pledges and donations has been raised toward that project.

"We're trying to move so fast, although there is controversy about even building a shelter," said Amelia Dallas, chairwoman of the Rockingham County Board of Commissioners. "But people don't understand, we've got to do it."

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