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ONE-EYED GIRL, ONE-EYED CAT FIND EACH OTHER

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Courtesy photo Mikayla McSheehy and her new best friend, Ernie, share the special bond of having the same condition — she has a glass eye and has lived with one eye her whole life and Ernie lost an eye to an infection three years ago. The pair found each other last week thanks to Panhandle Animal Shelter's Home-to-Home website.

By DEVIN HEILMAN

Staff Writer

SPIRIT LAKE — Mikayla McSheehy was born with a defective eye.

At the wise age of 13, she knows people can be cruel when a physical limitation — in her case, a glass eye — is prominent.

So when she and her grandpa, Bear, found Ernie the one-eyed cat on Panhandle Animal Shelter's interactive Home-to-Home Animal Adoption website, she felt an immediate sense of kinship with the feline. She knew he needed an understanding human who would accept and cherish him.

"I think it's cool because I feel like I know what he went through," Mikayla said Wednesday. "He and I have probably been through the same thing. I feel like we really bond because of that."

Mikayla and her grandpa just happened to be checking out Facebook together last week when a post about Ernie needing a home popped up on the screen. It originated on www.home-home.org and was shared by Timberlake Litter Control, an animal hospital in Spirit Lake near where the family lives.

"It showed this beautiful picture of this cat who was bored and needs a home or to be loved," Grandpa Bear said. "Mikayla saw it and was like, 'I love that cat. He's just like me. Papa, I want that cat.'"

Ernie came to Timberlake Litter Control with a bad eye infection. His left eye was surgically removed and he spent several weeks recovering at the clinic, where staff fell in love with him. He had nowhere to go, so he became the clinic mascot.

After three years as the mascot and honorary clinic manager, Ernie began to get bored — and into mischief. It was time for him to move on.

"We have loved and cared for Ernie for about three years but being a clinic cat does not provide the most enrichment for his life. It was time to find him a forever home and what a perfect fit he found in Mikayla," said Timberlake Litter Control veterinarian Dr. Mary McKinney. "This doesn't often happen — just often enough to make you believe that miracles really do happen."

Grandpa Bear said Ernie's adoption was "meant to be." He explained Mikayla is his adopted granddaughter and Ernie was a happy addition to a home with four adopted dogs and another cat, North Lane, who adopted the family five years ago when he showed up and never left.

Ernie officially joined the family Dec. 22.

"The cat instantly jumped on me," Bear said. "I think we just have good animal vibes. They gave us his little blanket and we brought him home and he was instantly comfortable.

"We're just a bunch of misfit adopted people and animals."

Mandy Evans, executive director of PAS, said she's overjoyed at the success of the www.home-home.org website, which has led to a 33 percent reduction in owner surrenders since its inception this fall. The Home-to-Home program allows people to rehome their pets without dropping them off at a shelter.

"Many wonderful new beginnings have been made with home-home.org, but there is definitely something special about Ernie and Mikayla's story," Evans said. "It's kind of a magical thing that happened."

The bond between teen and feline was also instant.

"He likes playing with yarn and he loves being pet," Mikayla said. "He sleeps with me every night. I love him."

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