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*Peggy Elliott and Sheriff*

## A NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN

by Peggy Elliott

**From the Editor: The following article appeared in *Like Cats and Dogs*, the latest addition to our Kernel Book series. It begins with a note by Dr. Jernigan:**

*Have you ever felt you knew just about all there was to know about a particular subject only to find you still had a lot to learn? This is precisely what happened to Doug and Peggy Elliott (both long-time leaders in the National Federation of the Blind) when they brought a baby kitten who happened to be blind into their household. Here is how Peggy tells the story:*

We have a new little kitten at our house. She's all black, but she had a tiny white star on her chest when she was born. It's grown in black now, but we still call her Sheriff.

Sheriff is four months old. Everything in her world is a toy to bat, chase, gnaw, or pounce upon. She is endlessly hungry, begs for everything, steals the two older cats' food, and sneaks on the table to cadge tidbits from us. Oh, and I should have mentioned, Sheriff is blind.

My husband Doug and I are both blind. We heard about Sheriff from a friend who took pity on a starving stray cat and soon learned the cat was a mom with two little kittens. When she was tiny, Sheriff put her head on the flank of one of her sisters to follow her to food and play. The little sister did not survive, and Sheriff had an incurable eye infection from birth that left her completely blind.

Our friend told us about his blind kitten, mentioning that he did not have any takers for this perfectly healthy, happy, bouncy kitten because she was blind. We knew what that could mean, and we offered to take Sheriff if no one else wanted her. We wouldn't give her up now to anybody.

We were worried about stairs, her finding the cat boxes, and interaction with the other cats whom we now call the Great Cats in comparison to little Sheriff. Here's how each of these worked.

At first we kept Sheriff in a room with a cardboard box across the door. This prevented her from getting out, but we and the Great Cats could get in. We were worried that, if we let Sheriff roam, she would fall down one of our two staircases, both of which have turns in them. We got a bell on a blue collar so that we could find Sheriff and avoid stepping on her. We would put the collar on only when we were taking her out of the room. She got so she purred when we put the collar on.

We tried to show her stairs, making her little feet look at the edges and risers. She didn't like the lessons. We made her go down, one stair at a time, to get the idea. She hated this. Then, one day about a week after we had Sheriff, we noticed that she was upstairs.

We had put her on the floor downstairs to play and gone about our business, keeping an ear on her movements, or so we thought. Suddenly, she was upstairs. It turned out that Sheriff knew all about stairs. There was a short flight in her original home in a garage, and she had used them from the time she was tiny. She still kind of galumps down the stairs, being a little too short from nose to tail to walk down yet. But she obviously will. She's taught us that. We tried to protect her, to ease her into our home a bit at a time. She wasn't having any of that.

We talked about this and decided that, even as long as we have both lived as blind people, we can still learn about the capabilities of the blind. In fact, both of us have had experiences where people think we can't do something and (from what they intend as kindness), prevent us from doing it. Stairs are one example.

We were recently in Washington D.C. visiting our Congressman, and we were heading out of the building to get a cab. As we approached the door, a Capitol guard prevented us from going any farther, telling us that she would "take us" to a door without stairs.

We had chosen this particular door because it got us where we were going. Had we been "taken" to any other door, stairs or not, it would have been a lot farther from our destination. We insisted; she relented, and we exited as planned, stepping down the stairs as agilely as sighted visitors. I couldn't help thinking of Sheriff and the help we had tried so hard to give her as I descended.

Regarding accidents, we simply haven't had any. We don't exactly know how she finds the cat boxes (we have two, one on each floor). We guess it is by using her sense of where she is as well as her nose. Early on, we worked very hard at being sure she was back in her room every two hours or so when she was a one-room kitten to be sure she would be near a box she knew. Just like with the stairs, one day we noticed that a cat was scratching in the downstairs cat box, and each of us had a Great Cat on our laps. So much for thinking Sheriff couldn't find the cat box.

How about the other cats? GirlKitty is deeply suspicious of everyone but Doug whom she loves. Before Sheriff was even out of the carrying case in which she entered our house, GirlKitty was at the front door, glaring through the bars and hissing. In fact, we started calling her Miss Propane because she put her whole body into the effort, sounding like one of those propane tanks that cause lift in hot air balloons. She would even propane at Doug if he had been holding Sheriff, and she got a whiff of it.

In the early days, GirlKitty would punch Sheriff occasionally; you could hear Sheriff sort of go flying the other direction from the one she had been heading in. And once I think GirlKitty was actually holding her down and socking her—I was in the next room on the phone and, by the time I got in there, they were separated. But the thing we noticed most was that Sheriff never reacted to these expressions of disgust by GirlKitty. They were usually delivered right in Sheriff's face. But her body didn't move at all. We knew because the bell didn't tinkle.

We talked about this as well, relating it to our own experiences. Eye contact is crucial to cat communication, but it's very important to people as well.

GirlKitty seemed very puzzled that she was getting no reaction from her fierce glare and hiss. We have both known people who were very uncomfortable talking to us. It has often seemed to us that part of the discomfort comes from lack of eye contact and uncertainty on the sighted person's part that we can detect they are talking to us.

In Sheriff's case, of course, it just may be that Sheriff has better manners than GirlKitty. Anyway, she's found her own form of revenge. GirlKitty is very food-focused since she almost died as a baby from lack of nourishment. For a while, she said horrible things to Sheriff when the little kitten would try to join the Great Cats at the dry food dish. So Sheriff figured out that she could fit under the kitchen stool that happens to sit next to the cats' food station. GirlKitty can't.

So Sheriff gets under the stool and sticks her head out long enough to grab some food and then withdraws under the stool to eat. GirlKitty can't do a thing about it except stalk off in distaste. We didn't teach Sheriff about the stool. She figured it out for herself.

And then there's Bob, our large, mellow, kindly, clingy male. One day early on when Bob was eating, I put Sheriff on his back. Bob kept eating. Sheriff slid off on purpose. I put her back. Bob kept eating. This went on for a while because I was trying to teach Sheriff that one of the Great Cats was not a meanie. She learned.

When she finds Bob now, she jumps up on his shoulder or up his side in play. Bobby will sort of run and fight back appropriately, not knocking Sheriff across the room as he easily could but batting and taking evasive action as part of the game. They tussle like that. Then Sheriff loses physical contact and starts looking around with her paws for Bobby. (Doug calls her Scatters when she does this—running back and forth in very short spurts in a search pattern.)

If she doesn't find Bobby and he still wants to play, he will scrabble his back claws very fast on the linoleum or hardwood. Sheriff hears this and jumps. They start the cycle again.

Doug and I have laughed about this as well, having met people in our lives who are immediately comfortable with us, realizing that, although we respond to oral instead of visible cues, we are otherwise pretty much just ordinary people. Bobby got that idea right away with Sheriff. But he also tires of the kitten's endless playfulness. When this happens, he vaults over Sheriff and trots off.

Sheriff is still learning. When she came to us at six weeks old, she was too small to look at chairs with her paws and understand them. We would hold her in a chair and then put her down. She learned to climb up the upholstered recliner in her first room using claws, but she often misjudged and fell down before she learned.

She's now four months old and has a much longer wheel base from nose to tail. She has looked at the kitchen chairs with her paws, figured out how they are made, learned that they are comfortable, and now regularly hops into one or another. That is how she gets on the table. I now keep the chair next to mine pushed in all the way. Sheriff can get her head and upper arms up on the table but not the rest of her. So she sits there when I'm eating, for all the world like a little cat person except that she'd rather be on the table helping me with dinner.

And she applied her knowledge about kitchen chairs to all the other seating devices in our house. You never know now in which chair or sofa you will find her. We didn't teach her about chairs at all. By the time she learned, we had figured out that she did better learning on her own. We just get out of the way and let her explore. She does just that.

There are lots of other stories I'd love to tell: Like the fact that Sheriff gets in the middle of a wide open space like the kitchen floor and just plain dances—hopping and jumping and leaping to music only she can hear. Like the swisher toy we have—long strips of plastic attached to a rigid stick that you can shake in the air or tap on the ground, moving it around quickly for Sheriff to hear and attack, which she does with the same speed a sighted kitten would. Like the Great Cats hiding when the new bathroom was being put in while Sheriff hung around outside the door, listening and smelling and talking with the workers, as fascinated as the Great Cats were scared.

But I won't. Instead, I'll just say that Doug and I have been in the National Federation of the Blind for a long time and worked hard to learn that we can handle daily living tasks, jobs, home management just like our sighted associates. And we have both worked hard to spread that word to our hellow daily brothers and sisters as well as to our sighted friends. Even so, in the last three months, we've learned again the lesson of how easy it is to underestimate the capabilities of the blind. We were taught this lesson by a little black kitten we call Sheriff.