

# Hobbled by amputation, Henry inspires others

Through his rescuer, he dispenses advice to humans in pain

BY JOHN WOESTENDIEK  
[SUN REPORTER]

Henry is a three-legged cat who has published two books and answered more than 20,000 personal letters; a feline who, while he may have used up one or two of his own nine lives, has gone on to comfort and inspire thousands of human ones.

Not bad for a homeless kitten that, after the ashes of Southern California's 2003 Cedar Fires stopped smoldering, showed up on the doorstep of an unscorched home in the mountain town of Julian and wormed his way into the hearts of a displaced family staying there.

His troubles didn't end there. Henry wandered out one day, only to be found later with one of his front legs crushed. The family couldn't handle a veterinary bill, so it was up to the home's owner, Cathy Conheim, who lives most of the year in San Diego, to take the cat to a vet.

The vet gave Conheim a choice: Euthanize the cat to stop its suffering or amputate the limb and see if the cat recovered.

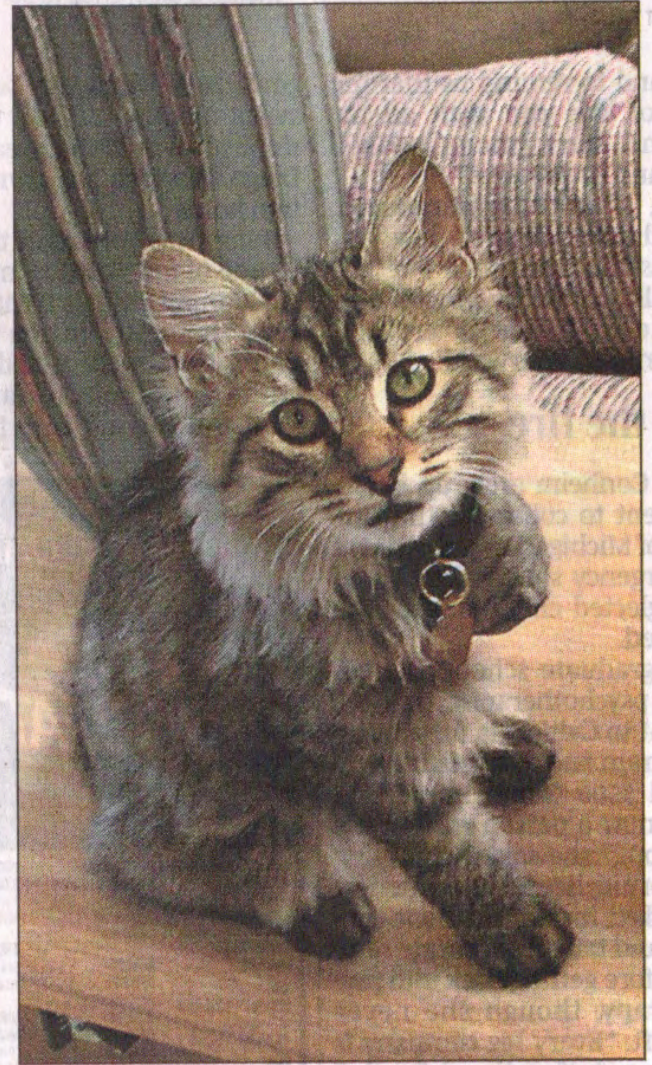
Conheim, a 63-year-old psychotherapist, wasn't just neutral about cats; she hated them — and had ever since childhood. She learned to hate them, she said, from her mother, who, paralyzed from polio, loved to watch birds out the window of their Detroit home. Neighborhood cats would keep those birds away — or worse.

"I never had a cat. I didn't want anything to do with cats. They killed birds," Conheim said. "I never really questioned it for 60 years, which I suppose is what prejudice does until you have some chance encounter that invites you to change."

In the car outside the vet's office, Conheim and her housemate, Donna Brooks, made the only rational choice under the circumstances — euthanasia.

"We had made the decision, but I couldn't get out of the car," Conheim recalled. "From the moment we decided, he just kept purring and staring into my eyes."

That Conheim could look into eyes of the scraggly tabby with a dangling limb and choose the most expensive and complex option says [Please see CAT, 2C]



Tens of thousands of people have written to Henry, a three-legged, formerly homeless cat.

[COURTESY CATHY CONHEIM]



ONLINE See more photos of Henry at [baltimoresun.com/henry](http://baltimoresun.com/henry)

something, she thinks, about the connection between hate and ignorance, and the ease with which both can be overcome.

That tens of thousands of people have since turned to her three-legged cat for advice — “Dear Tabby,” he’s been called — speaks volumes, too.

After Conheim and Brooks brought Henry back to their home in San Diego — still not convinced they wanted a cat around — Conheim sent an e-mail to about 20 friends, relating the tale of their new three-legged roommate.

Those friends forwarded the e-mail to their friends, who forwarded it to their friends, and so on, until complete strangers were contacting Conheim — or, more often, Henry — many of them to share their own traumas, problems and challenges.

Conheim answered all those as well — in her own name the first few days, then almost always in the voice (purr-sona?) of Henry. And these weren’t one-size-fits-all form letters, but individualized responses based on what the writer had shared with her.

Before she knew it, Conheim was counseling through her cat — helping wounded Marines, cancer patients, relatives of murder victims and others work through their own challenges.

Henry’s e-mail list swelled — and long-running dialogues began. Some of those with whom he corresponded even flew in from other states to meet him, said Conheim.

Conheim would go on to share Henry’s story in two self-published books — the first a compilation of the e-mail exchanges called *Henry’s World*, the second a book aimed at children called *What’s the Matter With Henry? The True Tale of a Three-Legged Cat*. All of the profits from sales go to humane societies and animal-welfare groups.

Speaking gigs followed — at Rotary Clubs and other community organizations, such as the Southern California church Conheim recently addressed.

“Henry is not a Republican or Democrat, he belongs to no specific church. He is not black, Hispanic or white, he is not gay or straight,” Conheim said at the church. “He is just a mixed-breed country cat brought here to remind us of what matters, what we need to do on this



Henry cuddles up to owner Cathy Conheim, who writes books and answers e-mail in his voice.

[TIM BRITTAIN]

Earth, and to remind us that the power of love can melt all hatred and hurt, move hearts, minds and mountains.”

Henry, after being introduced, watched quietly from a pew.

“It was the third time I’ve given a talk on Henry where over half the audience is crying,” Conheim said afterward.

## After the fire

Cathy Conheim grew up in Detroit, went to college at the University of Michigan and worked at an emergency shelter for abused and neglected children after she graduated.

After graduate school, she became a psychotherapist. In 1975, she went to California for a training program and decided to stay.

“I had \$500 to my name and didn’t know a person west of the Mississippi,” she said. Not having a California license to practice, she worked in management consulting and taught corporate seminars before getting back into psychotherapy, though she never really left. “Every big company is basically a dysfunctional family,” she says.

In the 1980s, she had a radio call-in show in San Diego, but dropped it when the quest for ratings seemed to become more important than helping listeners.

Conheim was home in San Die-

## LESSONS FROM HENRY

Cathy Conheim says she’s learned these lessons from Henry and now shares them with others:

- 1. Hate is learned.** We hate what we don’t know and don’t understand. When we get to know someone, human or animal, the hate goes away.
- 2. Bad stuff happens.** Tragedies don’t define us. Our response to them does.
- 3. Be true to yourself.** Don’t let others make you into something you’re not.
- 4. Play the hand you’re dealt.** Don’t place blame. Play the hand life gives you, no matter how challenging.
- 5. Connect with what you care about.** Do something that makes a difference to somebody.

go in 2003 when the Cedar Fires swept through Julian, the small mining town an hour east of San Diego in which she owns a vacation home.

Henry was born after those fires — one of four kittens in the litter of a domesticated cat that had become homeless in the fire. The four kittens were found and taken in by a displaced family that Conheim was allowing to use the

MATT DAMON

THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM

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home.

Conheim would see the kittens on her visits there, and during one of them she noticed there were only three animals. After a search for Henry, they found him, maimed, in the doghouse that belonged to her poodle, Dolly.

Conheim never figured out how Henry was hurt. "I think he either fell out of a tree or was hit by a car," she said.

After Henry's surgery, Conheim said she still didn't intend to keep the cat, just nurse him back to health in San Diego and find a home for him.

She and Brooks — together, she says, they have 131 years of experience with dogs — decided to keep the cat no more than two weeks.

"But in two days it was clear Henry was never going anywhere else," Conheim said.

Henry captured the poodle's heart, and the spirit he showed during his recovery moved Conheim and Brooks. Conheim's e-mailed updates about Henry to

a few close friends grew into something resembling a subscription list. She and Henry have answered more than 20,000 letters, she estimates.

One day, opening a letter to Henry that she had picked up at the post office, eleven \$100 bills fell out, along with a note to Henry that said, "You seem like the kind of guy who would know what to do with this."

Another time, Henry was contacted by the friend of a woman who saw her husband get stabbed to death. The husband was a cat lover, and the friend asked Henry to write the woman.

"I couldn't write her, but Henry did, and she's written back four times," Conheim said.

In her letters to people who have lost pets, or been victims of violence, war and cancer and other diseases, Conheim says, "I sort of drop into a different ego state — to a much more innocent level."

"I've always known about therapy dogs that go into hospitals and

nursing homes and help with healing. Pets have been shown to boost immunity and lower blood pressure," she said. "But I wouldn't have guessed that a virtual pet would have had this impact."

Last month, Conheim handed out free copies of *What's the Matter With Henry?* to the children of military personnel in San Diego. Conheim supplies her books free to animal-welfare groups and allows them to keep the profits from all those they sell at \$15 each. The book is not sold in stores but can be purchased through the Internet. Henry's Web site is [henrysworld.org](http://henrysworld.org).

Conheim is still answering mail, looking for alternative ways to share Henry's message and making speaking engagements. That's one of the lessons Henry taught her, she says.

"The fact that you can't do everything doesn't give you permission to do nothing."

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