

Tricia Helfer

The Star of *Dark Blue* Tells How Her Cats Light Up Her Life

By Lori Golden



Tricia Helfer is one of those busy actresses who might be familiar to you from her guest stints on *Two and a Half Men* or *Burn Notice*, or as the humanoid Cylon Number Six in *Battlestar Galactica*. Most recently she was added as one of the co-stars of *Dark Blue*, airing Wednesday nights at 9pm on TNT. Prior to acting, she was a model, gracing the covers of magazines such as *ELLE*, *Marie Claire* and *Vogue*. And before that, well, Tricia Helfer was a farm girl in Alberta, Canada.

Tricia was born and raised on a grain farm, where she cared for chickens, which she says may have added to her animal activism. “We mostly had farm cats that were never allowed in the house,” she tells me. “We had a border collie named Lady, who I grew up with until she died at age ten, from a heart attack in a thunderstorm. She really hated thunderstorms. Since then, I’ve always had cats.”

As an adult, Tricia’s fondness for felines began when she adopted Bella and Delilah while still in New York City. Then came Bug, who was found abandoned by a friend. The rest of her cats have all come from Kitten Rescue, an organization she first discovered while shopping at a Petco in West Hollywood.

“We weren’t ready at that time to get another cat because we had just rescued Bug, but I donated some money to the group. It’s not like I give out a bunch of money all the time.... I just had a good feeling about this organization. When we decided about a year later that we were ready to adopt another cat, the name Kitten Rescue had just stuck in my head. This was also about the time that I was setting up the shop section on my website, (triciahelper.com) and we were looking for a good animal organization to donate money to. So I remembered Kitten Rescue, found their website, and visited their shelter in Glendale.”

“At that point we had the three cats. Bella and Delilah were siblings and Bug was kind of like the odd man out. I just had this feeling that he needed a kitten as a friend, because it was almost like he had been lost from his mother too early. When I got him he would bunt my hand when I would feed him, so I felt he needed something smaller, and I didn’t think he could handle an older cat. That’s when we met Ben Lehrer, the president of Kitten Rescue, who told us about a kitten who seemed to be the only survivor of a litter that was wiped out by illness. Lily, the kitten, didn’t have it. We adopted her at around 8 weeks old, and she and Bug became the closest of friends. He was her biggest protector. They’re still friends but as adults they’re not as close as they were when she was a kitten.”

“At the same time we adopted Frankie, who was 13, because she really flirted with my husband. This is when I really knew my husband was an animal lover as well, and not just dealing with me, so to speak. So we got both Lily and Frankie at the same time.”

That was almost five years ago. Frankie and Tricia's husband Jonathan are still 'lovers.' "She sleeps on top of him at night," laughs Tricia. "In fact, four of the cats are always on the bed with us, the others are off and on the bed or sleep under it. But they're always around us."

"We adopted Mr. Nix when he was about twelve years old. He survived a house fire and suffered third degree burns on all four paws and his ears were singed. There were two other cats that survived the fire as well, and they all ended up at Kitten Rescue. He spent 2-3 months at a vet hospital and we got him after that."

Tricia was part of the "Be an Angel for Animals" campaign created by PETA, which featured our cover boy, Mr. Nix, in their campaign poster. "I agreed with that campaign because it was a message I felt strongly about, which was that if you adopt an animal it becomes part of your family, and that you should treat these animals with respect."

"In my experience, cats don't usually do well in photo shoots. I took both Frankie and Mr. Nix because they seem to be the most people friendly. But Frankie got scared. I've never seen her scared of any person at all, but I think being out of her environment frightened her and she hid underneath the couch at the photo studio. Mr. Nix doesn't really like to be held. He loves you to play with him on the floor. I think we got such good shots out of him because, out of his environment, I was what he knew... so he didn't mind being held for the photos. He just sat there in my arms for about 45 minutes. I actually had a really sore bicep because he weighs about 20 pounds. He's a big boy!"

All rescue groups should be as lucky as Kitten Rescue is to have such a loyal supporter as Tricia Helfer. She donates money to them through her website, she's adopted cats from them, and she also fostered a litter of kittens for them. "I try to raise awareness about Kitten Rescue, and to promote any events they may have coming up thru my website."

In fact, Kitten Rescue is having their big fundraiser on September 11 – their third annual Furball at the Skirball. Tricia was honored by the group at their first event, but had to leave right after cocktails to catch a plane for work. But she and Jonathan attended last year's event. "I thought it was fantastic. In a materialistic way it's a great shopping opportunity for the holidays. We got some beautiful vases, which I love to look at, from their silent auction. It's also a fun event. Jenna Fischer, from *The Office*, is a fantastic host. It's a very well put together event that offers great food, great entertainment, and wonderful stories about Kitten Rescue and all they do." This year attendees to the event might just rub shoulders with some of the other stars of *The Office*, including Angela Kinsey, Oscar Nunez and Ellie Kemper, as well as Rich Sommer from *Mad Men* and Casey Wilson from *Saturday Night Live*.

Ben Lehrer, Kitten Rescue's President, said this about his loyal supporter: "Tricia Helfer has been a fantastic supporter of Kitten Rescue from the moment she walked into our West Hollywood adoption event a few years ago and stopped to find out what we were doing. Not only has she been extremely generous as a donor to our efforts, she has helped with a number of our fundraisers and been a very vocal proponent of animal causes in general. She also happens to be a fantastic cat mom and has adopted several cats from us. Tricia and her husband Jonathan even fostered a litter of kittens that someone left in a carrier in the driveway of our shelter. We're really blessed to have someone as beautiful, dynamic and thoughtful as her on the side of the animals."

About that litter of foster kittens they cared for, Tricia says, "There were four kittens in the litter about four weeks old. We fostered them until they were about ten weeks and then I started going

to adoption events where we adopted out two of them together. But we ended up keeping the other two because my husband got emotionally attached to them. We had done the home visit for the other two cats to make sure everything was fine, and we dropped them off there. But when we were leaving Jonathan had tears in his eyes and said we had to keep Rigby and Fiona. We were finding them good homes and this was what we were supposed to do, but he just wasn't prepared for it. And then we asked if we could adopt the brother of these two from Kitten Rescue who had been very ill, but eventually recovered. His name is LeBron."

Tricia's shop section on her website, in addition to supporting Kitten Rescue, also donates money to RAPS, Richmond Animal Protection Society in Vancouver. "I became familiar with them when I was filming there for about five years. They contacted me and I checked out their shelter, which is very similar to Kitten Rescue's, but much larger. 90% of the proceeds from the website go mainly to these two groups as well as occasionally to other animal charities."

Tricia offers some good advice about introducing older cats into a house with younger cats. "There's always an integration period. What we found with our two oldest adoptions, Frankie and Mr. Nix, is they were the most open to new animals coming into the home. Mr. Nix was a complete superstar when it came to the kittens. He took them under his wing, he protected them, he cuddled with them, and he's still closest to them. Fiona and Mr. Nix are like boyfriend and girlfriend even though they're ages apart. They just cuddle and love each other completely."

"I isolate new cats to begin with and then I bring the new cat into the room in a carrier," continues Tricia. "When we're around we set the carrier in the middle of the room, to give the cats a chance to smell the new cat. In fact, we'll quite often bathe a new cat that we adopt or wipe them down to get the smells of the shelter off the cats. They are always in separate rooms to begin with. For ones that are more difficult to integrate, we'll take a towel that one of them lays on and put it in another room where the other ones can smell it. Get them used to the smell first. I think that's the most important thing. It can take from one day to three months to go through this process. It took Bella and Delilah three months to accept Bug, where I felt comfortable leaving them alone. With Mr. Nix it took one day. It really depends on the animal coming in as well as the personality of the animal you're introducing it to. There's no set way to do this."

As for how people can help animals and rescue groups these days, Tricia says, "donations to rescue groups are really important with so many shelters and groups being over-run with animals because of the economy and slow downs with adoptions. Adult adoptions are always difficult because people don't seem to want to adopt older animals. But from my experience, they make some of the most amazing additions to the family because they're so thankful... they seem to understand."

Tricia and her good friend Kate Sackhoff are planning an event now to help the animals in the Gulf Coast affected by the oil spill. "Since we both like motorcycles we're going to recreate the *Easy Rider* route and travel from Los Angeles to New Orleans, with hopefully a motorcycle rally in Louisiana to coincide with a music festival at the end of October. We'll be looking for riders to join us and for sponsors to donate to the ride. We're building a special website for this event now. Katie's focus is on the fishermen and mine is on the wildlife."

"I don't know why cats have struck such a chord with me – perhaps it was because we had cats on the farm when I was growing up. I could always sense their personalities and I just always had an affinity towards cats. I love their independence. Every animal has a unique personality and I think, quite often, people don't think cats have personalities like dogs do. For instance, my

nephew has been visiting us and last night Cesar, one of our other cats, was showing off the first night he was here. He was playing with every toy possible and running into walls and just being completely silly and funny. The next night we tried to get him to do it again but he was like, 'yeah. Don't feel like it.' I feel an affinity with him because that's how I feel a lot of the times. Sometimes I don't want to play, sometimes I do. I adore their personalities and their uniqueness. You can just see their minds working and their thought processes. I love all animals across the board, but I just have this affinity for cats."

"Having cats has fulfilled me in so many ways. When I first adopted Bella and Delilah in New York, my dad was worried because I talked about them a lot. It wasn't until a couple of years later when my dad found me studying on my bed with Bella laying on my back that he said, 'I get it.' These are my little buddies. They're my family. My dad's real concern was how I would react when they pass away, because animals' lives are usually shorter than ours. That's when I told him I would rather live having had them in my life and having to deal with the pain of losing them than not having had them in my life, because they've enriched me so much. They just give you pure honest love. That's really what it's all about – sharing your life and your love with them."

(In addition to seeing Tricia at The Furball at the Skirball on Sept 11, and on Dark Blue on TNT, her film Open House, with Anna Paquin and Stephen Moyer has just come out on DVD. And Beginner's Guide to Endings, a film she made with Harvey Keitel and Scott Caan is premiering at the Toronto Film Festival this month.)

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