



## **Willow the Heaven-Sent Comfort Cat**

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Beth, our dietary manager, peeked in my office door. "I want you to meet our newest resident," she said. I smiled and turned in my chair.

Welcoming people and helping them adjust to their new surroundings is one of my responsibilities as chaplain at Madrid Home Communities, a nursing home with 110 residents in central Iowa. I was always happy to greet a new resident. But Beth was holding a tiny calico kitten.

"One of the nurses found her at the front door," she said. "She had her paws against the glass like she wanted to come in. We're going to call her Willow."

"We're not really keeping her, are we?" I protested.

"It's so cold outside and there's no sign of her mother," she said, stroking the kitten's head. "The director of nursing said she could stay, for a while. She said a cat might even be good for the residents."

"Really?" I threw up my hands in mock surrender. No way is this going to work, I thought when Beth left. This is farm country. People don't keep cats indoors. What about allergies? Germs?

I love my work, but it's challenging. Moving to a nursing home is a major life change. There's the loss of independence. Sometimes it's not the person's choice to move here.

There's anger to work through. And grief.

It takes time for people to open up and feel they can trust me. I have to work at it. It's more than just being warm and fuzzy.

Sadly, the residents' time with us can be all too short. I sit with the family as the end draws near and often hold memorial services at the nursing home. Definitely no place for a cat.

Yet no one seemed to have told Willow. She settled in right away, roaming the halls as though she belonged here. Afternoons, I'd find her sprawled across a sofa, snoozing away.

One day I spied her sitting on the lap of a man who had recently lost his wife. He wouldn't talk to me about it. I watched as Willow stood on her hind legs, her front paws on the grieving man's shoulders. She nuzzled his cheek, her purr so loud I could hear it across the room.

"It's almost like she was hugging him," I told Beth later. "Like she knew he was hurting."

"Maybe she did," she said.

Willow took to visiting residents' rooms. She had a kind of route she followed, like a doctor making rounds. I'd overhear people talking to her, or reading to her. One afternoon I sat down with a woman who had recently received some bad news from her doctor. Her face and shoulders sagged with worry.

I heard a rustling and turned to see Willow padding into the room. A smile crossed the woman's face and her shoulders lifted, as though a weight had been taken from her. I knew the comfort hadn't come from me.

Even the chapel wasn't off-limits. I hold worship services twice a week and was speaking from the pulpit one day. In came Willow. She sat in front, gazed up at me, yawned, scratched herself. Then, when I went on too long—too long for her—she turned and sauntered out.

Everybody's a critic, I thought. The next time I saw her in the chapel she was sitting at the altar, paws folded in front of her as if in prayer. I know, cats can't pray. But it was quite a sight.

Late one evening I sat with two sisters keeping a vigil over their dying mother. The room grew stuffy and one of the women opened the door. There was Willow. She walked in and jumped into the lap of the sister who was still sitting.

The woman absently began to stroke Willow, while holding her mother's hand. Willow didn't make a sound. After a while she hopped down and climbed into the lap of the other

sister. For hours she went from one to the other, never intruding, just being present, a gentle, healing touch.

Early the next morning the mother breathed her last. Willow padded over to a hide-a-bed in the corner, curled up and went to sleep, her job done.

"God be with us," I prayed with the sisters. "Help us to feel your love and the power of your spirit even now in our time of sorrow." I opened my eyes and looked over at Willow, knowing my prayer had already been answered. I wasn't the only one ministering to the residents.

I told Beth the next day what had happened. "Aren't you glad we let her stay?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "Call me a convert, but I think Willow's going to work out fine."

Today Willow is one of six comfort cats at the nursing home. I can't imagine doing my job without them. Willow sits in the chair next to my desk every morning and I talk to her about the day ahead. She's a great listener, a colleague I believe was heaven-sent.