

Scarlett, blaze heroine

Brooklyn,
New York
(2007)

(page checked
February 2026)



One of the most striking stories of a cat's courage came from Brooklyn, New York City, in 1996. On 29 March that year, in the area known as East New York, an auto-dealer's abandoned premises caught fire. Fire engines were soon on the scene and the blaze was almost extinguished when Fireman David Gianelli heard faint mewling coming from near the ruined building. He found there, huddled together, two 4-week-old kittens; and three others were found just across the street. Their mother, who had been badly burned, lay nearby.

She had rescued her brood from the burning building and, as she could carry only one kitten out at a time, must have made five separate journeys into the thick, choking smoke and blistering heat in order to do so. Her devotion, courage and persistence are almost unbelievable.

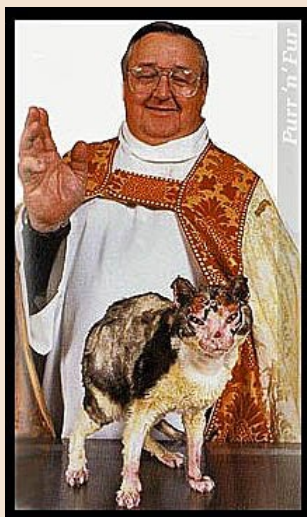
Gathering all the animals carefully into a box, Gianelli noticed that even though her eyes were swollen shut, the mother cat counted her babies by touching each with her nose, making sure all were there, before herself lapsing into unconsciousness. The family was taken to the North Shore Animal League facility at Port Washington, Long Island, where there was a state-of-the-art veterinary hospital and emergency service. Ten years earlier Gianelli had taken a badly burned dog there, which had been restored to health, so he knew it was the best place to take the cats.



They were treated for burns and smoke inhalation and placed in an oxygen chamber in intensive care. As well as her swollen eyes, the mother's ears were seriously burned, her paws scorched and her fur singed. The name **Scarlett** for her came about because her actions in saving her family recalled those of Scarlett O'Hara in the epic film *Gone with the Wind*; but also because of the red patches of skin visible through the burnt fur. Her eyes gradually regained their sight, although it was necessary for surgeons to replace one of her eyelids. One kitten (named Toasty) unfortunately fell ill and in its weakened state couldn't be saved, but the other

four were restored to health and after some three months were ready to be rehomed.

An idea of Scarlett's condition not too long after her ordeal can be seen from the photo taken when she was blessed by Reverend Gary Maier of All Saints' Episcopal Church, Great Neck, New York (*below left*). We don't know any more about the timing or circumstances of the ceremony, but it was before Scarlett was rehomed.

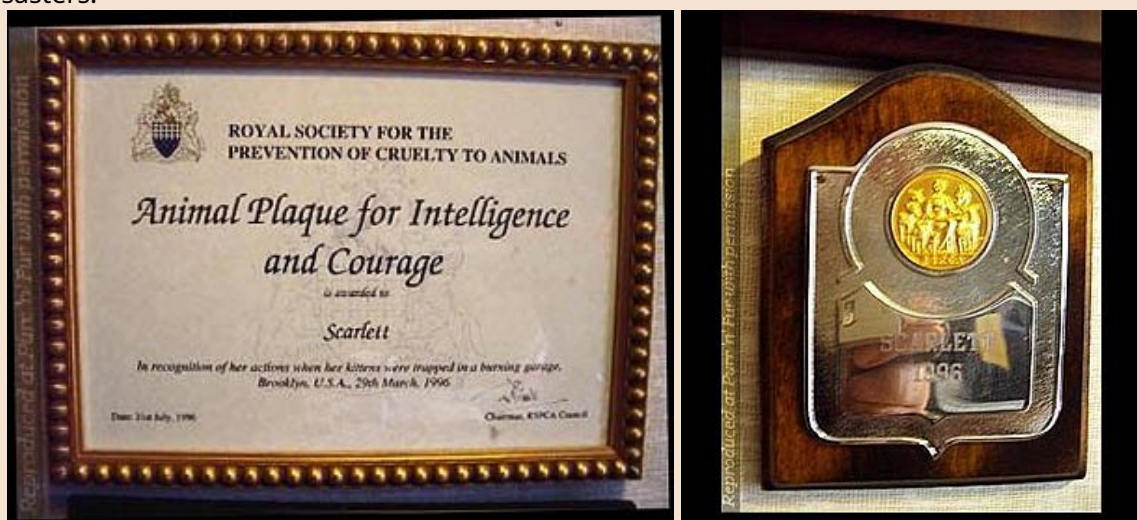


Thousands of offers of homes were received from around the world after the story became known, but in fact the kits were homed, in two pairs, quite near to NSAL where they had been treated. **Samsara** and **Tanuki** went to the Vercillo family in Port Washington, while **Oreo** and **Smokey** (later called **Cinders**) lived with Debbie Palmarozzo of Miller Place, also on Long Island. [*Sadly, Tanuki died of cancer in September 2008; he had been diagnosed a few weeks earlier, but it spread very quickly and nothing could be done to save him.*] After very careful consideration of the possible new homes for their mother, Scarlett returned to Brooklyn to live with writer Karen Wellen (*below*) at her parents' house. Karen's own elderly cat had recently died and she wanted to take in an animal with special needs. Despite needing medicated eye cream three times a day, Scarlett otherwise recovered well and for a number of years enjoyed excellent health (*see more below*). 'I expected to see a scrawny, hairless cat,' said Karen, 'but she was gorgeous.'



The [North Shore Animal League](#) created an award in her honour, to be presented to animals

that take part in actions that benefit humans or other animals; it's called the Scarlett Award for Animal Heroism. Awards have been made to dogs from the 9/11 and hurricane Katrina disasters.



In addition, Scarlett received a certificate for bravery (*above left*) and a plaque from the British [RSPCA](#) (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), which joined the numerous ribbons, citations and press photos and features on the 'Scarlett Wall' at her home. The text reads, *Animal Plaque for Intelligence and Courage is awarded to Scarlett in recognition of her actions when her kittens were trapped in a burning garage, Brooklyn, U.S.A., 29th March 1996*. The plaque itself proved hard to photograph clearly, but the inscription 'Scarlett 1996' can just be seen at the centre (*above right*). Scarlett even received a message from [Socks Clinton](#), who was 'in office' at the White House at the time; and her story was featured in a reader for American elementary-school children. Her fame certainly spread!

More information can be found at a [CNN page \(archived copy\)](#). At the Moggies website there's a [poem \(archived copy\)](#), and some more photos [here \(archived copy\)](#), including one of the burned-out building and of rescuer David Gianelli.

More problems

In December 2007 it was very pleasing to hear from Scarlett's owner Karen that, more than ten years on, Scarlett was still living with her and was 'as sweet and beautiful as ever'. However, despite all she'd been through, she'd had to fight a new battle, as during 2007 she was diagnosed with lymphoma. Excellent medical care and a good response to the treatment meant that the disease was later in remission — and of course Scarlett was nothing if not a fighter. Karen kindly sent a new photo (*below left*)



In late April 2008, though, came further bad news: Scarlett was suffering from hyperthyroidism, which she'd had in the past but that had been dormant for some time. It became necessary for her to be taken into a facility called Thyro-Cat to receive treatment with radioactive iodine; during this time, because of the danger from radiation, she wasn't allowed visitors. The treatment and the time until she was deemed 'safe' and able to return home lasted a week — clearly an extremely worrying time for Karen and her parents. However, with Scarlett's heart and kidneys in good shape, and the cancer still in remission, she seemed to come through the treatment all right (*above right*). Although she suffered from loss of appetite for a time and had to be hand fed, the news in early June was that her thyroid was functioning correctly, she had her appetite back and once again all seemed to be well with this remarkable cat. All her many, many fans and supporters 'out there' hoped that would continue to be the case for some years yet.

Heart-breaking decision

However, it wasn't to be. On top of all her other problems, including now a heart murmur and some difficulties with her teeth, came kidney trouble — so often fatal in older cats. So it was with brave Scarlett. Each day became more of a struggle for her, and the quality of life she could enjoy was deteriorating rapidly. She was hospitalised, but when she went home she couldn't even stand up. Karen said she 'knew there was no going back'. After consultation with her vets it was felt that the cat had suffered enough, and so on 11 October 2008 the heart-breaking decision was made to put her to sleep. She died peacefully in Karen's arms, with 'two wonderfully caring and compassionate vets' from NSALA in attendance. Anyone who has had to make a similar agonising decision will know how Scarlett's owner felt.



These are the last two photos (*above*) of Scarlett received from Karen. We salute this amazing feline, who overcame so many difficulties to lead an almost normal life for 12 years after her ordeal by fire. We salute also her carers, Karen and her parents, for the unfailing love and attention they gave her.

The kits

Although she hadn't seen Scarlett's offspring for quite a while, Karen said she stayed in touch with their owners and they were all doing well until Tanuki's death in late summer 2008. Then, in May 2013, it was reported that Samsara had also died, aged 17, after having had some health problems for a time.

NSALA

Deserving of a very special mention as well is the [North Shore Animal League of America](#), who paid for all Scarlett's medical bills throughout — an extraordinarily generous gesture. If anyone cares to make a small donation to NSALA in memory of Scarlett, and to aid their ongoing work with other needy animals, please visit their web page where methods of donation can be found.

NSALA took a paw-print from Scarlett to incorporate into a plaque to be presented to Karen. The cat herself was cremated. There's a [web page in memory of her](#) (*archived copy*), with links to other NSAL animals near the top of the page.

Postscript

A stunning tribute to Scarlett was noted in the NSALA newsletter. When the League notified the press of Scarlett's death, Reuters picked up the news and for 24 hours, a few days later, a huge image of her appeared on their screen in Times Square, NYC. NSALA didn't know this was going to happen and neither did Scarlett's carer, Karen Wellen. It came to light when some person unknown sent this image, probably taken with a mobile phone (cell phone), to the League.



NSALA wrote its own glowing tribute to the brave cat to accompany the image in the newsletter, under the heading *Scarlett: How one cat touched so many*. It's reproduced here, very slightly amended:

'On Saturday, October 11, 2008 the world bade farewell to the beautiful and heroic Scarlett the cat, as she lost her struggle against several health issues.

'North Shore Animal League America was extremely saddened by Scarlett's passing. She was not only a dedicated mother, fearless heroine and beloved pet, but she was also an inspiration to us all.

'Scarlett's five kittens were not the only lives she saved in her lifetime. Her celebrity saved countless animals at the Animal League and all over the world, shedding light on the intelligent, intuitive and loving nature of cats. Her face regally adorns the pages of the League's life-saving Sponsor Program, as she represents all the special-needs felines in our care.

'Scarlett impacted all who knew her and touched the lives of countless people around the world. On October 17, 2008 at the 'Crossroads of the World', Times Square, New York City, Scarlett's larger-than-life image illuminated the night on the world's largest digital sign, the Reuters sign. At 35 feet wide by 32.5 feet tall [*about 10.8 x 10 metres*], viewers marvelled and paid tribute to a cat who surpassed everyone's imagination and expectations.

'North Shore Animal League America would like to extend its deepest condolences to Scarlett's family and supporters. There will never be another Scarlett, but though she is physically gone from our lives, she will never be forgotten. She will remain the symbolic cat who represents all the cats in our life-saving, special-needs Sponsor Program.'

The text above Scarlett's image reads: 'Scarlett, the World-Famous, Brave Mother Cat who Survived a Fire and Saved her Kittens, Passes Away.' [*What a marvellous way to celebrate her life*

and mark her passing! —Ed.]

Later

In early June 2009 the NSALA held its annual luncheon, at which the Scarlett Award for Animal Heroism was presented — she received the first one then. Nine years later in 2018, the League decided to present the award to Karen Wellen, Scarlett's owner and carer, in honour of her brave cat. In addition they were beginning a new fundraising idea, namely 'Tribute Tiles', which are to be mounted on a wall in a new building at the League's headquarters. The first one of these to be made shows Scarlett, and Karen was surprised and delighted to be presented also with two extra ones that had been prepared specially.

The photo (*right*) shows Karen receiving her award and the tile — which she acknowledges on this emotional occasion she was holding upside-down! Karen maintains a Facebook page for Scarlett, [Scarlett the cat](#).



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For other cats suffering from burns, see Featuring / Special Needs 3.