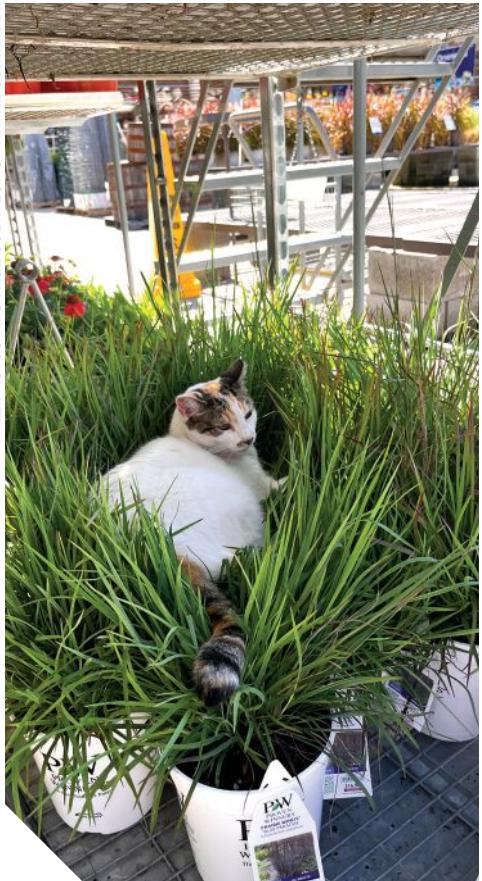


TASK FORCE FRANCINE



When Richmond's beloved Lowe's cat went missing, multitudes of people pulled together to get her home

BY JEN REEDER



Lowe's employees Mike Sida and Wayne Schneider with Francine



Wayne and Francine

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ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS RESIDENTS OF RICHMOND, Virginia, is a true community cat named Francine. She has touched the lives of countless people — and they returned the favor in dramatic fashion when she went missing last fall.

Since 2017, Francine has been a fixture at the Lowe's home improvement store on West Broad Street in Richmond. The pretty calico cat has a tipped ear, which indicates that she has benefited from trap-neuter-vaccinate-return (TNVR). She was skittish at first, but when Lowe's employees began feeding her, she gradually warmed to people. She sometimes even lets customers pet her while she's lounging on boxes in the lawn and garden center, her favorite area.

Though Francine was free to leave anytime, she didn't. Lowe's became her home. Several employees manage her care — from meals to veterinary visits — including Wayne Schneider, the store's front-end manager. "Mostly I work morning shifts, and she'll be at the desk when we come in," he says. "She's waiting on her treats and her loving and all that stuff. She's one of us. She greets people and lies around, and she's very good with kids."

Some customers have told Wayne that they visit the store specifically to see Francine. One woman whose husband is battling cancer told him: "Francine just gives me hope." The beloved cat even garnered eight write-in votes for mayor in the 2024 election.

So, it was a shock when Wayne arrived at work the morning of Thursday, September 18, and Francine wasn't there to greet him. "I couldn't find her anywhere," he recalls.

THE INITIAL SEARCH

Wayne asked the assets protection team to check security cameras to look for Francine. But on Friday there was a rumor that she'd been spotted, so they didn't check the cameras. When he still didn't see Francine on Saturday, Wayne put in another request because he was so concerned about her.

He wasn't alone. Elise Gilmore, an environmental technician and graduate student, learned from her friend, Chas Nabi, that Francine was missing. Chas lives near Lowe's and likes to walk his dog, Bowie, inside the store on rainy days — and Bowie likes sniffing out Francine to say hi. When Bowie couldn't find Francine, an employee told Chas the cat was missing.

On September 27, Elise and Chas launched an Instagram page called “Where’s Francine?” and Chas also posted the news on Reddit. “At first, our goal was just to tell Richmond because at that point we thought maybe someone had taken her or maybe she just wandered off and got a little too far to find her way back,” Elise says. “We were hoping that if a lot of people in Richmond had their eyes on it, she would come home.”

A BREAK IN THE CASE

They then got an anonymous tip that Francine had been spotted on a Lowe’s security camera getting onto a semitruck bound for the distribution center in Garysburg, North Carolina, located about 85 miles away. Francine had wandered away from her usual haunts and ended up on the truck. At the distribution center, she fled into the 1.4 million-square-foot facility, where 18-wheelers are constantly coming and going. When Wayne heard the news, he drove to the distribution center, but once he was there, he learned he didn’t have the necessary credentials to enter.

Meanwhile, Elise and other concerned residents banded together to form Task Force Francine to try to find her. One woman created a document called “How the Community Can Help,” containing scripts for calling and emailing Lowe’s executives.

Another concerned person was Elise Traub, Best Friends chief external affairs officer, who lives within walking distance of the Richmond Lowe’s and shops there frequently. A cat lover, she keeps

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a folder on her phone titled “Queen Francine” that includes photos she takes whenever she sees Francine. Best Friends has adoption programs for cats who wouldn’t do well in a home but can enjoy living in barns on farms or in “big box” stores like Lowe’s. Elise loved seeing Francine thriving in such an environment. She says, “Francine is the true embodiment of a community cat. She is loved and almost collectively owned by many people in the city.”

HUGE TEAM EFFORT

To help find Francine, Elise T. reached out to a colleague to try to get information and help from Lowe’s corporate staff — including access to the distribution center. They learned that Lowe’s would allow a local animal control officer to set up a few traps, which he would check every 24 hours, but they feared that wouldn’t be sufficient.

Elise T. suggested to Task Force Francine that they use the petition tool on the Best Friends website that’s part of the Best Friends Action Team, which empowers people to take action in



PHOTO COURTESY OF WAYNE SCHNEIDER



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELISE GILMORE



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their community to help animals. So Elise G. and others created a petition directed at Lowe's, asking for daily updates about Francine, site access for additional trappers and volunteers, and use of advanced technologies, like heat-seeking drones and motion-sensitive cameras, to find Francine.

"I think in the first six hours we had 4,000 signatures," Elise G. says. "And nearly 10,000 in the next few days." The petition launched on Thursday and on Saturday, Lowe's corporate sector agreed to increase their efforts per the group's requests. Elise says, "Lowe's really stepped up in terms of their efforts to find her."

Lowe's implemented humane trapping advice from SOS Cats RVA, a local community cats advocacy group, and allowed associates like Wayne and Mike Sida, warehouse manager at the Richmond Lowe's, to enter the distribution center to call for Francine and leave her favorite food and bowl.

In the wee hours of Monday, October 6, Wayne got an exciting phone call: Francine was safe inside a humane trap. A maintenance worker had carried her to an office, where she was waiting for a ride home. So at 3:30 a.m., Wayne and Mike drove to the Garysburg distribution center, where they found Francine meowing in a crate. "We got her out of the cage and then she jumped up in my arms. She started purring," Wayne says. "She was just happy to see us."

THE QUEEN RETURNS

Back in Richmond, Wayne took Francine to a veterinarian for a wellness check (she'd lost a little weight), then took her home for the rest of the day so she could relax and enjoy lots of food and pampering. When he took Francine to the store the next day, staff

and customers immediately started clapping to celebrate her triumphant return. "She walked around and greeted everybody, and everybody was petting her," he recalls. "It was amazing." Wayne was also amazed by the outpouring of support. One woman even drove four hours from Raleigh to bring Francine a big bag of gifts. Wayne set up a board in the store to share all the letters, flowers and donations for Francine.

Elise G. celebrated Francine's return by putting together a fundraiser called Francine Fest at Main Line Brewery, which donated 10% of sales to Richmond SPCA. Five bands performed — including The Francines, a group named after the famous feline — and local businesses and artists donated raffle prizes to benefit SOS Cats RVA. The event raised over \$10,000 for SOS Cats RVA and \$3,000 for Richmond SPCA, plus two carloads of donations were collected for Richmond Animal Care and Control.

Elise G. finds it incredibly touching that Francine became a unifying force in the community and beyond. "It was honestly inspiring for me," she says, "to see people put their differences aside and not care about political beliefs or religious values or whatever else divides us. It's been beautiful to watch."

Elise T. attended Francine Fest with her husband, their 8-month-old daughter and their cat, Pineapple. She's thrilled that the event raised so much money for animal welfare organizations and feels that Francine's journey home is a remarkable example of how we can make genuine change for animals when we take action. It's how so many shelters reached no-kill by 2025 and how we'll continue to make progress.

"This shows the power that animals have to bring people together for a common cause," she says. "And that's really what we're about at Best Friends: saving animals and working to bring about a time when there are no more homeless pets. We can't do that without the support and help of ordinary people in communities, and I believe the collective effort to find Francine is a perfect example of that." 