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Learning with Laz

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Learning with Laz

Learning with **LAZ**



Photo by Cynthia Chambers

by Lazarus (as told to Cynthia Chambers)

M My name is Lazarus. I

am a rescue cat who loves to snuggle, eat treats and nap often. That's

right; I'm a typical cat! However,

there is something unique about me too. I was born with a cleft palate, leaving me with no nose or upper lip. I also have bottom canine teeth that protrude, which adds to my interesting appearance.

So what's a cat doing in Breaking Ground?

Well that's because I'm not only a cat who happens to have special needs, I'm also an educator and advocate! Let me tell you a little bit more about me and my journey.

I was rescued on September 11, 2012 by an East Tennessee State University (ETSU) student. I was homeless, malnourished, flea infested and had a severe infection in my mouth. The student connected me with Dr. Cynthia Chambers, an Associate Professor of Special Education, from ETSU. She's now my Mama! I was taken to the vet immediately and given a plan for recovery.

My health improved but I continued to have problems. One rescue group across the state offered medical support for me, but they wanted to keep me. Mama, being a special educator, couldn't send me off without



Photo by Josh Salyer

my very own advocate. In that moment, she pledged to keep me safe and to provide me with a loving home.

Mama started a Facebook page called Care for Lazarus. This site was created to reach out to others to gain informational and financial support for my care. The response was overwhelming! People around the world liked my page (i.e., today over 20,000 people) and responded in the

most unlikely yet positive ways. Given the generous support of Facebook friends and other animal lovers, I was able to have surgery at the University of Tennessee Veterinary School. This surgery has resulted in fewer infections and left me on a healthy trajectory.

My funny and inspirational Facebook page has become a place where everyone's unique qualities are celebrated. My international audience includes people of all shapes, sizes and abilities. The page also allows people to follow my journey. Steve Simpson, a Facebook friend with Asperger's Syndrome, wrote, "Lazarus has taught me that differences or disabilities don't make you less human or in Lazzie's case, less feline." Another friend, Deborah Day, shared that,

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“Lazarus reinforces my belief that ALL animals and people with and without disabilities deserve our best effort. We all have the right to live a full life.” These comments encompass what Care for Lazarus is all about!

My journey has led me down a path that no one could have ever anticipated, but comments like the ones above make me want to share my message with broader audiences. Given the generous assistance that was provided to me when I was a kitten and the difference my message is making online, Mama felt like we should give back in some way beyond the efforts of our Facebook page. One of those efforts is called Learning with Laz and it’s where I went from Star Cat to educator and advocate! I am an advocate for the rights of all beings no matter how seemingly different they may be, because we are all more alike than different.

Learning with Laz is an educational program that shares my story but also addresses broader issues such as finding your own unique characteristics, celebrating what each person brings to the table, making your mark on the world as well as caring for animals. The Learning with Laz program has visited schools of all levels in the Tricities of East Tennessee, and the program’s content is adapted in age-appropriate ways.

At recent visits to two Kingsport City Schools (i.e., Pre-K and 1st-3rd grade classes), Mama and I shared a lesson on ways that we are different and similar with the similarities being more plentiful than the differences. Another visit was conducted at a high school in the Johnson City School district. Mama and I talked about transitioning out of high school and building a positive



Photo by Nick Hubbard

legacy. The Learning with Laz program is open to school-aged groups with or without school affiliations. At the end of all of my visits, participants have the opportunity to pet me. I’m sure that’s their favorite part!

I have met a lot of different people in my short life of almost two years. From young to old, somehow, through hearing my story and message, perspectives are being changed. From the child with a cleft palate who says, “I’m like Lazzie and that’s okay”, to an adult who says, “I can make a difference in the lives of others”, becoming an understanding society of people with varying abilities often comes down to awareness. I hope my story can create some of that awareness.

To learn more about me or to follow my adventures, visit www.facebook.com/careforlazarus. Inquiries regarding the Learning with Laz program may be made at careforlazarus@yahoo.com.

Cynthia Chambers, PhD is on faculty at East TN State University, a Partners in Policymaking grad and a member of the TN Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Lazarus is the 2014 Star Cat of Modern Cat Magazine. Cynthia Chambers is an associate professor of special education at East Tennessee State University, a Council member, Partners grad and the proud mother of Lazarus.