

## The Tale of the CAT-Nip Mice

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*“A basket full of colourful catnip mice on the counter of the Summerside Animal Hospital provided my first introduction to the work of the Cat Action Team”*

*-- Anne MacPhee, CAT volunteer*



Her friends refer to Francine Labbé as the “Mouse Meister” – the expert craftsperson who oversees the production of the catnip mice which have virtually become a symbol for the Cat Action Team of Prince Edward Island.

But Francine refuses to take all the credit: she recalls that it was Joy Tremblay, one of the founding members of CAT, who brought a single, homemade catnip mouse to one of the earliest meetings in 2001. Joy was convinced that the mice could be sold to raise money for CAT.

At first, Joy designed, sewed, and stuffed each mouse herself, completing one at a time before starting work on the next. But Francine, whose family were clothing manufacturers in Montreal, realized that the mice could be produced more easily and quickly if the assembly process were broken down into carefully planned steps.

Francine searched for colourful fabrics with small patterns; she cut the fabric into carefully shaped mice-bodies; she used ribbons and twine to fashion ears and tails for the mice; and she ordered the high-quality, organic catnip used for stuffing.



Francine developed a routine: on weekday evenings, she worked at preparing the mice bodies and parts. On Sunday afternoons, she hosted parties where volunteers gathered to stuff the mice, under her careful supervision.

Stuffing the mice is itself an art: each mouse is allotted at least two tablespoons of catnip. Fibre-fill is added to achieve exactly the right size and firmness. According to Colleen Pidgeon, who has been stuffing the mice for years, it takes about half an hour to stuff ten bodies.

Initially the mice were sold primarily at flea markets and yard sales, but then Francine and other volunteers arranged for the mice to be sold also at veterinary clinics and a few retail outlets

across the Island.

In 2002, approximately 500 mice were made and sold. Since then, the number has increased by approximately 500 a year, until, by 2007, 3000 mice were being sold annually. Originally, the mice were sold for a donation to CAT of \$2.00. In 2010, the price was finally raised to \$3.00.

Meanwhile, increased sales meant that Francine needed more help. Ron and Linda Curtis, who had been among the first volunteers to take part in the Sunday stuffing parties, assumed responsibility for many tasks: For example, Ron and Linda began to crochet, from carefully selected yarns, the colourful tails and ears that replaced the tails and ears Francine had been making from ribbon and twine.



Ron also took over the highly skilled work of cutting the fabric. According to Francine, Ron not only “cuts like a pro,” he also cuts fast, preparing as many as 400 fabric mice bodies in an evening. It is at this point in the process that the bodies are partially sewn together.

Everyone is always on the lookout for new patterns. Colleen Pidgeon is particularly proud of a fabric she found which featured tiny images of paw tracks. Also highly prized are patterns that can be used for specially themed Christmas, Easter, or Halloween mice. Ron and Linda have set aside an entire closet in their home for storing the fabric they collect.

The procedure for stuffing the mice has also evolved: Over the years, Francine has trained the large number of volunteers who now work individually to stuff the mice according to her precise specifications.

Once stuffed, the mice are ready to be sewn shut. For years, Francine did all of the sewing on her own industrial-quality machine, but recently Sandra Arsenault has been helping with this part of the job. It is at this stage in the process that Francine and Sandra attach to the mice the previously crocheted ears.

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After being sewn shut and then finally adorned with tails, each mouse is sealed into its own plastic bag, along with a label proudly identifying the mouse as a product of CAT. To ensure that each outlet will be able to display a variety of colours and patterns, the mice are sorted by fabric before being put into delivery bags of fifty mice each.

Although Francine and Ron visit a few outlets, the majority of the deliveries are made by Paula Connolly, who drives hundreds of miles every month, to every corner of the Island, collecting the revenues and delivering fresh, new mice.

Since the first few mice were sold in the summer of 2001, sales have risen steadily until, in 2010, gross income from the mice amounted to \$6888.90 – a clear sign that discriminating Island cats value the high-quality product that Francine and her team have so carefully developed and marketed over the past decade. But don’t just take our word for it: go here – <http://alturl.com/fzd4h> – to see Harry, one of our satisfied customers, at play with his favourite CAT-nip mouse.