

Anne's story

Living in borrowed time

Coby Reedijk ©

In the summer of 2004 I heard about more cases of HCM positive cats in our breed, the Norwegian Forest. My worst fear was becoming reality. Not just in my country the Netherlands, but in other countries as well more and more cases appeared. I decided to write an article for magazines of catclubs and NFO-clubs in the Netherlands. As a wake up call for NFO breeders to warn them about the danger of HCM for our breed. It was published in different ones. An altered version was published in a German magazine (also available on this site)

The end of June 1998 my last housecat died age 17,5. I first didn't want to have another cat in the house, but after a few weeks I felt I needed new familymembers with four feet and fur again. I had visited a catshow in the neighbourhood about a year back and had saved the card of a Norwegian Forest Cat breeder. I gave them a call and they told me they had a litter of a week old and two kittens age 4 months, both females.

After I visited them I was hooked on the two girls and Enna and Eirene came to live with me.

I never wanted to breed cats but I thought it would be nice for my girls to have kittens before I had them neutered. Eirene was the first in 1999 and again in 2000. She had been with different males but never had kittens.

Enna went to a male in 2000 and was due in August. To me at that time male x female = kitten. I didn't know anything about breeding, genetics or bloodtypes etc. I have become a lot wiser since then. And you will understand when you read this story.

On day 58 I woke up very early in the morning. I went to the bathroom and I saw Enna there. Her behind was wet and I noticed a wet spot on the floor that looked like water and blood. She had started already I thought, but she didn't have



Annelita 10 days old

any contractions. I called the vet who told me to get some antibiotics; he could not do anything. I had to wait and see. On day 61 she started having contractions but had problems delivering. We ended up at the vet's for a caesarean. It was August 14, 2000 when Enna gave birth to a little female, just weighing 54 grams. At home Enna woke up, but she wasn't interested in her kitten. After a few hours I decided that it was in the kitten's best interest to take her to another female who just had a litter. My youngest female Myrrha had a brother who lived one hour away from me. I was told they had a litter 2 days old. I called them, explained the situation and I could bring the kitten immediately. Jessy accepted the little kitten right away and started to take care of it.

At first I didn't know if it was a female or male, it was so small you could not tell. She was brought up by Jessy and by bottle. The other three of Jessy were so big compared to the kitten that it couldn't get hold of a nipple, she didn't get enough to eat. After 9 days the eyes of the kitten opened. By that time I could see that it was a female. I named her Annelita. One of her eyes didn't open well and after a few days I noticed that the left eye was different from the right eye. She wasn't blind, she could see, but she was more careful than the other kittens, we noticed when she was getting older. I send cards to family and friends when she was a couple of weeks old. The theme I used was:

"Even the smallest cat is a masterpiece" (by Leonardo Da Vinci).

It has become my credo.

When she was three months old and just weighed 1 kilo she came home to live with her mother, aunts, halfsister and me. It was November 2000. I took her to my own vet for a check-up and to ask what I should do for her eye. The vet heard a heartmurmur. This can go away when the kitten is older so I had to come back five months later. Her eye could be examined by an eye-specialist.

Anne has microphthalmie, this is a birthdefect and not genetic. During the third week of the pregnancy Enna must have been ill of a virus or something like that.

In May 2000 we went back to the vet who still heard a heartmurmur. He advised me to take her to a radiologist for an echocardiography of her heart. The first examination didn't go very well. Anne was upset and didn't want to lay still. The radiologist could not do any measurements but she said that on sight it looked like cardiomyopathy. It would be better if I came back in six months. In October 2001 we went back to the radiologist. When we entered the office, my vet's assistant left with her male who was just examined for HCM. He had been diagnosed positive before and this was his annual check-up. Anne's examination was next and she was now diagnosed HCM positive as well. The radiologist noticed that the mitral valves didn't function properly. She couldn't say if Anne's heartproblem was primary (there from the start=genetic) or secondary (caused by something else).

I didn't know anything about the disease so I started searching the Internet to find more information. I then read about the colony of Maine Coons and Dr. Kittleson and I then knew that HCM could be

genetic. I asked the breeder of Enna, also the owner of the male (Anne's father) if they knew about other cases of heartproblems. They said no, and that probably was so at that time. I found out later that the cat we met at the radiologist was related to Anne. One and one makes two.

On a catshow end of October 2001 another breeder came to me and told me her female, three years old, suddenly got very ill and died. The vet thought it was a heartproblem. They didn't perform an autopsy, so we never know for sure what it was. Later on I found out that this female was Anne's halfsister. I suspect it was HCM though. And that makes three.



Anne (right) three days old with her two days older "sister" who is twice as large as she is.

I have read a lot about HCM since Anne's first examination. I attended lectures about HCM but also about other healthsubjects, I also took a course in genetics. All things that I should have done before I even started breeding.

HCM is a disease that progresses slowly. It is possible that there are cats with HCM that never have any symptoms and die at an older age. It is possible that a cat gets very ill suddenly and dies at an early age. It is possible

that a cat is proven to have HCM at a very young age, like Anne who was probably born with it. HCM comes in many different shapes and sizes... It has a variable expression. There are many different ways within a breed but also differences between the breeds. That's one of the reasons why it is so hard to find THE gene that is responsible. DNA research in cats has not yet developed as far as with humans. It has to do a lot with money also. That's why there is still no conclusive test. The only test we can do is an echo cardiography of the heart.

Anne's mother has been tested three times now, all tests were negative. She has been tested

for the last time at age 7. Because she's a neuter it doesn't make any sense to test her every year. I also don't believe her genes are responsible. Her father died age 15 and her mother age 14. Anne's father has never been tested and I'm very disappointed about it. It's too late anyway, he was found dead in his run age 10. The owner did not find it necessary to have an autopsy done.

HCM has been proven to be genetic in Maine Coons, British

Shorthairs, Ragdolls etc. I strongly believe it is a genetic disease in Norwegian Forest Cats as well. To date, no viral or dietary causes of HCM have been identified in humans or animals.

The best thing to do when you have a case of HCM or any other genetic disease is to test the parents and grandparents. Unfortunately in Anne's case that's impossible. I decided that the best thing I can do is to have Anne's relatives and their offspring that live with me tested. Anne's halfsister Myrrha had just been with a male at the time of Anne's first examination. When her kittens were born I wasn't yet sure about HCM but I thought the best thing was not to sell any of them to a breeder. All kittens are neutered except one female, Britha Blåmannsdatter that lives with me. I also kept her brother Balder. Myrrha has been tested negative four times and will be tested again this summer. There is a small chance that she carries the dominant gene. She is one out of a litter of three. She has two brothers of which one has been used as a stud. The first time she was tested was three months before she had her second litter. She went to the same male and he was tested before the mating. He was negative as well. So the mating could take place. Myrrha's second litter was like her first, a healthy litter. This time all the kittens were neutered at age 12 weeks. Three of them are sold as pets and I kept Dagr, a neutered male, known as BJ.

I informed all the kittenowners from both the B- and D-litter when they came over for the first time at my house to look for a kitten. I showed them Anne and talked about her.

I also told them that I would put a statement in my contract that an autopsy has to be done when the cat died suddenly without knowing the cause and

no other tests could be done before. If it's necessary to have their cats tested in the future, they will do that for me.

When a cat is tested positive you know a 100% for sure. When a cat is tested negative you don't know for sure. That's why you have to repeat that test every year as long as the cat is a breeding cat until around the age of seven.



Britha has been tested in March 2004 and 2005. She was tested negative both times. Because her mother Myrrha was still negative I decided she could have a litter. Britha went to a tested male. Her brother Balder, a neuter, will be tested this summer for my own research in the lines, together with his mother. Next year it will be his younger brother Dagr's turn. The neuters will be tested every two years until they are around the age of seven. I also

decided to have all my breeding females (including the ones not closely related to Anne) tested as long as I breed with them. In my breeding program I will only use males that are tested.

HCM is a disease that we as breeders should take seriously. We only have to look around to other breeds (Maine Coon, British Shorthair) and see what damage it can do to a breed.

Anne is not the only Norwegian Forest Cat with HCM. And she's also not the only one already born with it. Mostly it develops around the age of three. I have reason to believe that there are more cases of HCM up in Anne's lines. I find it my duty to try and find out where the problem comes from. Not to accuse other breeders but to help the breed to stay a healthy breed.

That's the reason why I informed the breeder of my cats and other breeders that I know who have

breeding cats related to Anne. And that's also the reason why I am very open about this subject. It does not make me popular among all breeders but I don't care.

I know that there are a lot of breeders who don't believe there is HCM among Norwegian Forest Cats. I know that there are breeders who say I give the breed a bad name saying my Anne has HCM. By talking about Anne and sharing her story on my homepage a breeder said I

gave one of his males a bad name because he was related to her. I don't see it this way. He replaced the male to another cattery without the information I had given him so far.

website and in several databases. And also all the testresults are sent to the Foundation Felissana. A foundation here in the Netherlands that does research on all kinds of genetic diseases.

hand in hand with HCM. Often medication for the heart is used as medication for kidney failure as well. Anne is on Fortekor, this medicine is also used for cats with CRF.

I also wrote to other breeders in the USA and Danmark because they wrote they tested for HCM. I asked them what their reason for testing was. I did not get an answer back. In my opinion we have to share information, only that way we can find out where a problem comes from. And then we can all work together on the problem to make sure that the Norwegian Forest Cat stays a healthy breed. We as breeders are all responsible for that.

Unfortunately Anne and the results of her tests are still the only real proof I have. The owners of her relatives that have died or have been tested positive don't want to or can't be open about it. In March 2004 another relative of Anne (her halfbrother) has died at age seven of probably HCM. And that makes four. He hasn't been tested and his owner didn't have an autopsy done. She was not a breeder. I wrote her a letter but she never answered back. I don't need any more proof....I know for sure, my proof is living under my roof.

In August 2004 I found out that Myrrha's brother (same litter) was tested equivocal (6,1 mm). And that makes five.....

I talk about Anne a lot because I hope this way to make other breeders more alert to the problem and have their cats tested as well. A breeder friend of mine had a litter of three. One of the males in that litter was diagnosed with HCM. Because she knew about Anne and had talked to me I advised her not to wait with the examination. So he was



Myrrha and Dagr (2002)

If people ask me questions about Anne I answer them truthfully. Unfortunately a lot is swept under the carpet. Not all breeders talk about the problems they have or have had. Not every cat that dies suddenly is examined to find out what caused his or her death. Not everyone wants to test their cats; not even when there's a case of HCM in their lines. Because tests cost money...? Or is it because they are afraid they have to neuter one of their breeding cats...?

In my opinion the only way to get this disease out of the breed is to test and to share information. That's one of the reasons why I put the testresults of my cats on my

Because I talk about Anne I sometimes get more information on other cats with HCM. I started a search on the Internet on Anne's pedigree, the older generations. I came across memorypages of other breeders whose cats have died at an early age (under 7). I wrote to one of them in Sweden because I saw similarities with Anne's pedigree, she did not answer my mail. I finally decided to call her. We talked for 45 minutes and I could ask her all sorts of questions. She was not aware of the disease HCM, but she told me one of the cats did die of a heartproblem. Other's died of kidneyproblems or other causes. It seems Chronic Renal Failure (CRF) often goes



Anne on her birthday enjoying her mackerel cake

check-up. She said that it was a miracle that Anne was still alive. Anne is my living miracle. She also told me that Anne's HCM is genetic, it is not caused by anything else and it is therefor primary. It's important to find the gene that is responsible for causing this disease. Ann has been accepted for the initial research that will start as soon as there are enough funds.

Please support the group of breeders who are working together now for the breed in raising funds for DNA-research. If you want to donate you can do so through this website:

www.nfchcm.com/index.htm

There's a link to the Winn Foundation page were you can donate.

Coby Reedijk
Norwegian Forest Cats Elivagar
"Even the smallest cat is a masterpiece"
(Leonardo Da Vinci)

diagnosed at a very young age. They put him on medication when he was 4 months old, but unfortunately she found him dead on a chair at age 9 months.

There is a lot of information on my website on this subject. The pages on Anne and the story about the first litter are available in Dutch and in English. I have also written

Dutch pages on HCM, the echo cardiography and linkpages. If you want to read them, please visit my website at www.elivagar.net.

Our Anne is still with us. She is on medication since October 2001. She has always stayed very small; she just weighs a little over 2 kilos. In 2003 I took her to a cardiologist for a

Waarden in mm:
 LVd = 11 (n=11-16)
 LVs = 9 (n= 6-10) FS = 19% (n=29-55%)
 LVWd = 12 (n=2.5-5)
 LVWs = 13 (n=4-9)
 IVSd = 6 (n=2.5-5)
 IVSs = 8 (n=5-9)
 LA = 16 (n=8.5-12.5)
 Ao = 9 (n=6.5-11) LA/Ao = 1.8 (n=0.8-1.3)

Testresults October 2001



I know that the time Anne lives in is borrowed time. I hope we can celebrate her sixth birthday in August.