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Cardinals manager passionate animal advocate

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By **R.B. Fallstrom, AP Sports Writer**

ST. LOUIS — Inside Tony La Russa's northern California home, there are more dogs and cats than positions on the baseball field.

In a recent interview the St. Louis Cardinals manager counted a dozen -- half of them permanent residents and the other half benefiting from loving foster care while awaiting adoption. A rabbit, he remembered, made it 13.

The number is fluid, depending on the need, and La Russa always has room for one more. All ready to give him a royal welcome whenever he's home. Well, maybe not the rabbit.

"It's hard to keep track of it," La Russa said. "I'm not there very much, but they know me. They're wonderful."

The affection flows both ways. La Russa often hangs his cap on a bust in memory of his most treasured pet, a retriever named Rez, that sits at the front of his desk at Busch Stadium. At old Busch Stadium, to the manager's delight, a spotted pooch that belonged to one of the owners often claimed one of La Russa's easy chairs.

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The best way to lighten the mood of a man so intense that after all these years can invite confrontation while dealing with the gut-wrenching pain of your everyday, garden variety, regular-season loss? Naturally, inquiring about the manager's pet project.

In 1991, La Russa and his wife Elaine founded the Animal Rescue Foundation, or ARF, to find homes for abandoned animals while educating the public about the importance of the spay and neutering programs.

"He's very passionate about ARF," Cardinals general manager John Mozeliak said. "It's one of the many things people don't see about Tony."

"We all see the driven baseball side, but there's another side."

La Russa's celebrity helps generate donations and corporate sponsorships, not to mention show business types serving the cause. Twin "Stars to the Rescue" events are being held Saturday near ARF headquarters in Walnut Creek, Calif., and Jan. 18 in St. Louis, with each expected to raise funds in excess of six figures.

The Internet ad for the event depicts a puppy and kitten resting in a baseball glove, just behind a ball carrying La

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Russa's signature.

The manager has become a bit of an impresario during his off-time, recruiting country music star Vince Gill, rock acts REO Speedwagon and Huey Lewis and comedians Kathleen Madigan and Lewis Black to the budget-priced St. Louis event that La Russa proclaims will be the "best show this year" in the city.

The 18th annual California event features Air Supply and a band headed by actor Billy Bob Thornton, not incidentally a big Cardinals fan who narrated the video celebrating St. Louis' World Series title in 2006.

"It's a great lineup," La Russa said. "I enjoy the fact that we have a special opportunity to make money for ARF through some of these contacts."

These kinds of nights allow ARF to fulfill an ambitious agenda that begins with a no-kill philosophy. There are animal shelters, and then there's La Russa's nonprofit organization that counts 600 volunteers, 60 staff, and a \$4.5 million budget.

"Anything that raises money for ARF is close to my heart," La Russa said. "We've got a lot of great programs, but the only way you can make them work is to raise money."

ARF aims to socialize animals, surrounding them with volunteers to soften the edges, rather than lock them away to stare, whine or growl at visitors. La Russa considers his family foster parents of a sort.

"If you have the volunteers or the facility, it's the best way to do it because that gets the animal used to people," La Russa said. "If you get one that's in a cage, it doesn't know any kind of human interaction and you take them home, some people can be very impatient and they act kind of standoffish, they take them back."

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