

# A Family Grows in Baltimore



**When it comes to cats**, says Nancy L. Craig, three is the magic number—the most that a person may bring home before eyebrows start being raised.

Craig once stepped into an elevator only to have a woman nearby spy tell-tale tufts of fur clinging to her black wool coat and ask, “How many cats do you have?” “Five,” Craig replied, bracing for The Look. “When you tell people you have two or three cats, they understand and think you just love animals. There’s a distinct change in attitude when you tell them you have more than that,” Craig laughs.

Craig, an HHMI investigator at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, focuses on the intricacies of mobile bits of DNA called transposons that hop about the genomes of all organisms, from bacteria to humans.

A lifelong cat lover, Craig started her current brood innocently in 1997 when she found herself without a pet. She launched the effort to fill that void, like any dedicated researcher, by gathering as much information as possible—in this case, by visiting the rarified world of cat shows.

Amid the spectacle of pampered felines resting in opulent cages, Craig discovered the large, regal Maine coon. The breed’s name arises from the biologically impossible legend that it

resulted from the mating of semiwild cats and raccoons—a myth bolstered by the breed’s bushy tail and raccoon-like coloring. Long-haired with tufted ears and leonine “ruffs” around their necks, these cats, which can reach nose-to-tail lengths of 48 inches, are so smart, easily trained, and people-oriented that they’re often called “doglike.” The big, amiable felines fit the statuesque Craig, who notes, “I am not a girl who needs a small cat.”

Craig’s search for a Maine coon to call her own resulted in Rufus, a one-year-old classic brown tabby from a Maryland breeder. Craig then adopted a red tabby Maine coon kitten she named Dexter. Her third cat, a short-haired jet-black cat named Zuzu,

joined the clan after she saw him in a pet rescue center.

Though content with her three cats, Craig saw an advertisement one day in the *Baltimore Sun* for a Maine coon in need of rescue. Seeing it as “a sign” she rushed to the cat’s aid only to find she was too late. Instead, Craig adopted a gray mixed-breed named Granger.

Happy as one of three, however, Dexter became irritable, territorial, and destructive with the addition of Granger. Reluctantly, Craig found the newcomer a one-cat home where he is much happier.

Despite Dexter’s resistance, Craig decided she wanted Maine coon kittens. Her quest ended 750 miles away in Owensboro, Kentucky, at the Verismo Cattery. In order to take Ajax—a cameo, or light red, kitten—and Oliver—a silver tabby—home with her, she had to promise owner Tom Odom that she would keep the top up on her BMW Z4 convertible.

With five cats, Craig began to accept the ribbing and questioning from friends, and an occasional aghast stranger. The menagerie expanded further earlier this year after Craig and her partner Helen McComas were married. McComas brought to the household her aging shorthaired cat, Kitty, and sweet-tempered keeshond, Eli.

Despite her passion for her cats, Craig has no intention of entering the show world. She and McComas are satisfied just living with their ample animal family. —Lisa Chiu



“I am not a girl who needs a small cat.”

NANCY CRAIG

