

Classy cat remembered

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For some of the kids at Elysian Heights Elementary, he was the pet they never had, a portly cat dubbed Room 8 by the kids in, yes, Room 8.

The gray-striped tabby roamed the halls of the Echo Park school for 16 years, sauntering in and out of classrooms, sleeping on kids' desks and, to a teacher's dismay, wiping out a chalked lesson with his fur as he crept along the eraser tray below the blackboard.



Room 8 became a celebrity, arguably the most famous cat in Los Angeles. And his renown spread after he was featured in national magazines, appeared on TV and was the subject of a biography.

"I was lucky to be one of the sixth-graders who got to feed the cat in the teachers' room every day," recalled former student Julie (O'Neal) Hines. "We weren't allowed to have pets in my home, so a quick cuddle of Room 8's fat furry body was always a welcome thing."

Room 8 adopted the Echo Park school, showing up one day in 1952 and staying until he died in 1968. He'd disappear each summer, yet return each September on the first day of school.

"My first recollection of Room 8 was Miss Mason introducing him to our kindergarten class," said student Angie (Medrano) Nicolai. "She wanted us to know that he belonged to the school and that there may be times he would come into our classroom to visit. She put him down and he immediately jumped up on the desk next to the window to take a nap in the warm sun."

According to "A Cat Called Room 8," a book by Beverly Mason, the school's former principal, and Virginia Finley, a teacher, the feline was born in 1947,

and ran away after being mistreated by a boarder in the home where he lived.

"No one knew where he went at night or during vacation. Like the swallows of Capistrano, he returned every September for the opening of school to sleep on the desks of children," they wrote.

The local news media began to take notice of his annual autumnal return to school. His renown spread after *Look* magazine ran a three-page spread in November 1962 titled "Room 8: The School Cat."

Weekly Reader, a national magazine for elementary school pupils, featured the feline in January 1967. Art Linkletter had the cat as a guest on TV's "House Party," and Room 8 also was featured on "Big Cats, Little Cats," a television documentary that aired in 1968.

According to his biography, Room 8 received more than 10,000 fan letters from 47 states and several foreign countries - sometimes more than 100 letters in one day.

The volume of mail created an educational opportunity of sorts for fifth- and sixth-graders who were conscripted to be Room 8's "secretaries." They answered each piece of mail and signed it with a rubber stamp of Room 8's paw print.

The cat's paw prints also were embedded in wet cement in the front of the school on June 11, 1964, a scene Mason and Finley recall in their book.

"Everyone cheered! Television cameras rolled as he walked across the wet cement with his tail and head high."

Room 8 was hurt in a cat fight in November 1963, and he nearly died of pneumonia a year later. After recuperating at the Lockhart Animal Hospital in Hollywood, he spent nights and vacations with a family who lived near the school - the first time, Mason wrote, he was willing to accept a nighttime home.

Room 8 was 22 when he died Aug. 13, 1968.

In an obituary published the next day, the Long Beach Press-Telegram noted, "The cat with the funny name is survived by pupils who have attended Elysian Heights School since 1953, the year he decided to make the school his home and the children his mascots."

Room 8 was laid to rest at the Los Angeles Pet Memorial Park in Calabasas, where a 3-foot granite headstone marks his grave.

And there are still remembrances of the cat at the school where he made his home for 16 years.

Two paintings greet visitors in the hall next to a large version of his memorial medallion and a bronze statue.

He is the centerpiece of a triptych in the school library. A fading image of him adorns the outside wall of a classroom building. A 2005 mural on the side of the school auditorium by Yuriko Etue features the gray feline walking through California history.

"Elysian Heights School. Home of Room 8. School Cat 1952-1968" is inscribed in foot-high letters in concrete at Baxter Street and Echo Park Avenue.

And each year, Elysian Heights teachers like Sheryl Gallo read the biography of Room 8 to their students.

"Room 8 taught us kindness to all beings and respect for life," she said.

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