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Get Well, Mayor Stubbs

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Illustration by John Ueland



Unless you've been living under a rock and unable to pirate Wi-Fi from the neighboring rock, you probably heard the terrible news in September about the mayor of Talkeetna.

If not, let's get this out of the way early: The mayor of the tiny Alaska town is a cat named Stubbs, who has gained worldwide acclaim since a television station posted a report in July 2012 about his political success.

And like another political icon from Alaska, Stubbs makes global headlines — good or not so good. In September, *CNN*, the BBC, *The Washington Post* and *The Daily Telegraph* were among dozens of outlets that reported Stubbs was in critical condition after being brutally mauled by a dog. That news hit me especially hard because, as far as I know, I was the last reporter to interview a healthy Stubbs.

Earlier this year, after considerable wrangling by email, I snagged a summit with Stubbs at Nagley's General Store in Talkeetna, where he lives. We had a slow start. "Probably morning," handler Dennis Freeman, who also happens to own the store, replied when I asked for optimal interview times. "He's got a mind of his own."

Long a bustling base camp for mountaineers attempting to tackle the behemoth Mount McKinley, Talkeetna — two hours outside of Anchorage — has become a popular stop for casual visitors. The supremely funky, population-900 hamlet still has a Gold Rush feel, complete with a main road that would set a nice stage for a 10-paces-and-draw duel.

Tourists usually pack Nagley's, and a line often snakes upstairs to see Stubbs, who is like the president: If you want to find him, just follow the traffic.

When he was ready to see me, I was escorted upstairs by Lauri Stec, the store's general manager and the mayor's "day-to-day caregiver, manager and political adviser."

"He's a little [upset] today," Lauri warned me. I was about to ask why when I realized: Oh yeah, because he's a cat. Beyond the eager mob and racks of shirts with his image on them, Stubbs sat on a shelf of souvenirs, next to a stuffed moose doll.

I followed what I thought was proper protocol. First, I petted the mayor, but he had no reaction. I asked him a hard-hitting question involving grain subsidies, but he studied me with contempt. Then he licked his paw.

Katie Couric never had a political interview subject this tough, I thought to myself.

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Meanwhile, Lauri gave me the lowdown on Stubbs' political pedigree. Local lore has it that 16-year-old Stubbs won a write-in mayoral vote 15 years ago. Talkeetna is not a municipality, however, so it does not have a real mayor. But everybody has called Stubbs the mayor since his early years — which happens to be on his Wikipedia page — because he's always exhibited regal behavior: lapping out of the store's fish tank, displacing Lauri from her own office chair, getting cat hair in all the nearby businesses, sidling up to a bar to drink catnip-laced water out of a wine glass.

At some point, people started plastering "Stubbs for Mayor" signs around town. (The winters are long in Alaska.)

Stubbs is not the first cat to navigate lofty corridors of power. Hank, a Maine Coon, earned nearly 7,000 votes in a Virginia senate run; Tuxedo Stan launched an unsuccessful mayoral campaign in Halifax, Canada; and Morris received 7,500 write-in votes in a mayoral bid in Xalapa, Mexico.

My theory on why felines are such popular candidates: Cats do nothing, so they can't do anything bad. Cats don't send texts of themselves in the buff, aren't blackmailed for embarrassing cat videos — all of which are already trending on YouTube — and aren't led out of City Hall in tiny, cat-sized handcuffs — even though that would be so cute.

I bade adieu to the mayor and headed to the store's office, where Lauri showed me an immense collection of fan mail. The Stubb's BBQ company mailed him a bottle of sauce from Texas. Cat-food companies have sent him freebies. Five-dollar bills are stapled to letters from Kentucky, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. "Please have some catnip on us!" reads one letter.

Then there is *Catland*, a CD sent by an Arkansas musician named Dawn Coppola. It's a "collection of feline folk songs, inspired by my kitties," read the accompanying fan mail, which was signed: "Sincerely and Meow."

Stubbs' condition appeared dire after the dog attack, but he's a comeback cat. After major veterinary procedures and donations for medical funds received from well-wishers across the globe, Stubbs is on the mend.

He's even taken to his official Facebook page. "While at this point in time it is impossible to know whether my attack was politically motivated," Stubbs (or one of his aides) wrote, "I do hope that the government will seriously consider providing me with some Secret Service protection in the future to assist in preserving my remaining eight lives."



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Mayor Stubbs, Talkeetna, Alaska, is on the mend. He received lots of fan mail including a Catland CD from Feline... <http://fb.me/38wgXHS11>