Skin doc spares time for felines

Dermatologist who offers charity services in Africa also helps Island Cats mission

When Dr. John Strasswimmer first began his medical training, he planned to help animals by becoming a veterinarian.
But he instead decided to help people by becoming a dermatologist. And now he helps people and animals, especially two often-neglected groups in each area: feral cats and people with albinism.

Several times a year, he and wife Karin leave the Palm Beach home to go to countries in Africa such as Tanzania, Malawi and Mali, along with some Caribbean islands with large African populations, such as Grenada.

There he helps, for free, albinos and others in need of dermatological surgery. Albinos in Africa are in special need of help because not only do some superstitious people slaughter them for their body parts, but albinos also suffer — and often ultimately die young — from various forms of skin cancer.

Another group he’s glad to treat for free: A colony of cats on Chilean
them. They need attention and love to thrive.” So, he put up a swing on his property and sits there reading the paper so the cats get used to being around people.

Strasswimmer has spent enough time with these cats that a few of them have become tame enough for him to pick them up and play with them. One such cat once even became the Strasswimmer family’s house pet. After having him treated at Island Animal Hospital, Theo became an indoor/outdoor cat living in his home. Unfortunately, he died. “It broke our hearts,” he added.

Does he plan to get another cat? Not when he’s traveling this much. But, he adds, “my family and I have lots of love to give these outdoor cats — and we love them as much as if they were our indoor pets.”

Strasswimmer has lived in Palm Beach since 2006. He received his medical degree and doctorate at Tufts, Harvard and Yale. Not only does he give his time and love to the Palm Beach cats, but also to his local patients, students and Africans who need his dermatological help.

His model for leading medical missions through jungles and deserts is Dr. Albert Schweitzer.
“ ‘He’s most famous for going to Africa to help poor people. But what motivated him was a reverence for life and that is what I also aspire to,’ he said.”