

From wills to hospice care to funerals, pet care involves all seasons of life



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SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

My husband and I are parents to a bouncing 23-pound Boston terrier. Although he's a curmudgeonly 8 years old, we still see him as that 3-pound baby we adopted when our youngest two-legged child was a teen.

We lavish praise on his "doing his business" in a timely manner, tell him how long we'll be gone when we go out and even ask which flavor of bone he'd like for a snack.

And ... believe it or not ... we stupidly wait for a response.

Pet parents understand what I'm saying — and there are a lot of us. Nearly 75 percent of U.S. households have pets, and according to a 2013 poll by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 91 percent of pet owners consider them a part of the family.

There's more: 57 percent of us share our beds with our pets, 75 percent of dog parents use a different voice when talking to them and 63 percent of us would give our dogs CPR. Really.

As pet ownership grows, we want to be sure our pets have the best from the litter to the grave. From expert medical care to end-of-life options, the obligations of caring for a pet are important considerations.

Ruth Timmerberg, a 40-something work-at-home information technologist in St. Charles County, adopted her Lhasa Apso-Maltese mix from a shelter when he was 4 months old.

Timmerberg didn't go into this on a whim. From the day she brought Finnegan home, she embarked on a mission to ensure his care would continue throughout his life.

After figuring the average cost of food, vet visits, grooming and other needs her dog would need per year, she began a fund that she pays into monthly. Timmerberg also revised her will to include instructions for Finn's care should it be necessary in the future.

"We make sure our wills give instruction for objects: furniture, money, our house," she says, "why not a living thing that we love?"

Timmerberg compiled a list of friends who were willing to be Finn's godparent and guardian. Along with health care, food requirements and other Finn-important stipulations,

her will includes end-of-life instructions for her pet.

“If Finn is in pain in his final days, I have instructed them to have him euthanized,” Timmerberg says. “It’s what I would do for him, and it’s the right thing to do, even if it’s hard.”

END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS

As our pets age, it is inevitable that their care will become more emotionally complicated than a trip to visit the vet. And with that realization in mind, more families are planning end-of-life decisions right along with immunizations and treatments.

Bob McCool, veterinarian and owner of Tender Care Animal Hospital in Weldon Spring and Gentle Doctor Animal Hospital in O’Fallon, Mo., sees the anguish of pet parents when their pet is nearing the end of its life, whether by illness or advanced age. Most feel horrible guilt at the thought of euthanasia — even though it may be best for the pet — and have trouble deciding when the time is right.

“People are looking for that black and white time ... but there isn’t one,” McCool says. “I tell patients to watch their pet’s appetite, energy level and daily routine. You’ll see a change and you’ll realize.

“We can prescribe strong painkillers for the dying pet, but it’s more humane — in my opinion — to provide euthanasia in many cases. But for some, it is against their beliefs, so we show respect for that.”

McCool’s offices recommend support groups for many pet owners after their pet has died.

“It’s a lot like losing a kid,” he says. “They may be upset for months or more afterward and friends may not understand. People may say ‘it’s just a cat’ and that’s the worst thing you can do. A support group is great for understanding your grief.”

Dawnetta Woodruff, a veterinarian, runs Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice, which provides in-home, end-of-life care for pets in the St. Louis and Metro East areas. Founded in Florida three years ago, the Lap of Love concept has grown to include more than 50 satellite veterinarian franchises across the United States.

“The realization of driving their pet to their local veterinarian clinic for the last time is so heartbreaking. Our philosophy centers around the human-animal bond and the need for that bond to be as undisturbed as possible at this most difficult time,” Woodruff says.

MAKING ARRANGEMENTS

Lap of Love also helps families by being a point-of-contact for cremation options and services in their area. Though veterinarian offices offer cremation and disposal, families who want a more personal and dignified arrangement for their pets have other options.

Baue Pet Services, established four years ago, is one of the only pet cremation and memorial facilities in the area. The Baue family considers it a natural extension of their fourth-generation network of funeral homes in St. Charles County.

“So many of the families we serve at Baue have pets ... for those who don’t have children, their pets are their children,” Lisa Baue says. “We want to be a reliable place they can turn to when their pet dies.”

Kathy Kuebler is Baue’s pet grief specialist. “Anybody can do the mechanics of this difficult process,” she says. “We want to take care of the families with emotional care as well as the physical aspects. In the vet’s office, you don’t have time to deal with your grief. We are here to make that easier — to let families know it’s OK to feel that.”

Kuebler says, “I can come to your home when your pet is gravely ill and provide a home euthanasia, or I can just be there with your vet and your family at that time.”

From the moment a pet is entrusted to Baue’s care, it is taken care of individually; identification tags and an onsite crematory assure families of that.

Prices begin around \$175 for the cremation. As part of the service, every family is given a print of a paw or nose, a lock of hair and a certificate. Caskets are available but not mandatory; memorial urns are available as well as other keepsake products.

Kevin Collier and his wife, Sherry, of O’Fallon, Mo., were grateful to have heard about Baue’s services. They had been parents to Sophie, a Yorkshire terrier, for 16 years. “My wife and I had her even before we had kids,” Collier says. “Our daughters, Kortney and Kara, grew up with Sophie.”

‘QUITE AN ORDEAL’

When Sophie’s quality of life began to wane, friends told the Colliers about Baue Pet Services. Collier met with Kuebler, who explained the process and addressed his concerns.

At the vet’s office that final day, Collier was surprised at the deep emotional pain he felt. “I wasn’t prepared for the euthanasia at all,” he said. “The whole process is so quick. There were lots of tears ... even though I used to work in the hospice industry, it was quite an ordeal.”

He wrapped Sophie in the towel he’d brought her home in all those years ago and entrusted her to Kuebler, who was there to transport Sophie to Baue in the service’s pet van.

After the cremation at Baue’s facility, Collier picked up the special urn designed for Sophie’s cremains. “Her collar fit right on the top of the urn, with her name tag hanging down,” he said. “Our daughter Kortney had written a poem about Sophie, and part of it was etched on the urn.”

The urn has a permanent, treasured place on the Colliers’ fireplace mantel; a photo of Sophie stands nearby. “Every morning I can walk past the mantel and know that Sophie is still with us,” Collier says.

Whether deciding on cremation or intact burial for a family pet, the task of finding a physical burial place is something else to consider. Zoning restrictions and local laws often prohibit backyard burials, so a pet cemetery is a viable option.

Memory Park Pet Cemetery, a rustic six acres area of rolling hills and mature trees, sits just

off Big Bend Road and Highway 141 in Twin Oaks. One of the oldest and largest pet cemeteries in the Midwest, Memory Park is home to more than 3,000 pet gravesites.

Gary Baute has owned Memory Park for eight years. “The previous owner, Gene Eder, had this land for decades; it was farmland back then. His friends wanted to bring their pets out to be buried in the country, so he’d build pine boxes and give them a place to do that. Before long, he had a little cemetery,” Gary says.

A HAVEN FOR WILDLIFE

Baute bought the land and embraced the idea of giving families comfort through Memory Park. Both intact pets and cremated remains can be interred here.

The property is adjacent to a 48-acre county park, and the cemetery is surrounded by neighbors who help keep an eye on things. It is a haven for birds, squirrels, deer and other wildlife that enjoy the peaceful setting.

All around the property, headstones call out the names of pets: Pringles, Toby, Peanut, Fritzie Boy. Many sections hold generations of pets from loving families who are comforted by the ability to visit and recall years of memories.

Most graves are festooned with flowers, and each family has its own way of honoring their pet. Poetry is etched in some stones, and many are decorated with collars, photos and favorite toys.

“People visit all the time,” Baute says. “One lady has a blanket that she brings, and she sits by her cat’s grave and has lunch. There’s also a man who brings a couple McDonald’s hamburgers every Saturday and leaves them on his dog’s grave. They were his favorite treat.”

Another woman, elderly and on portable oxygen, visited the cemetery regularly for many years. She parked near her cats’ graves, got out of her car and leaned down to kiss each of the seven headstones; her oxygen hose trailed behind her as she walked along the row.

Then she got back in her car and drove away.

Memory Park is a solace to families from all over the United States. Baute has hosted burials for pets from Illinois, Texas, Arizona and other states. One woman from Phoenix sends Baute a box of flowers every month to refresh her pet’s resting place.

On-site services are welcome at the park, whether by family members, clergy or Baute himself. Three sizes of caskets are available for sale, ranging from \$150 to \$350. A complete burial can cost between \$500 and \$700.

Families decide how to handle the arrangements, and nothing surprises Baute. “We excavated our regular-sized plot for a great Dane and a hearse arrived with a full-sized human casket,” he says. “We just had to dig a bigger plot.

“We’ve had choirs, balloon releases — all kinds of services and celebrations here. Many families want to have a full funeral, with words being said and songs sung. Others want a quieter service. Whatever they want is fine.”

Baute knows that closure is an important part of Memory Park's mission. "I let the kids take part if they want — help carry the casket or some other symbolic action. It is a way to help them say goodbye.

"The love people have for their pets is just incredible. I've seen it over and over these past eight years." Baute smiles and looks around the peaceful landscape. "I'm so glad I can provide this place for them. We have room for thousands more, and we're happy to help."

MORE INFORMATION

- tendercarepethospital.com
- gentledranimalhospital.com
- lapoflove.com
- memoryparkpetcemetery.info