

Pet Loss

By Lauren Moore

a bond that Never Breaks

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With empty-nesting boomers filling the void in their homes with furry “kids,” and young couples putting off having children and test-driving parenthood with dogs or cats, pets today are special companions with treasured places in their owners’ hearts.

In fact, according to a 2011 study by the American Veterinary Medical Association, 63.2 percent of pet owners consider their pets to be family members. They’re also doing more “human” things with their pets, like dressing them up for Halloween, celebrating their birthdays and bringing them along on family vacations. It’s only fitting, then, that when beloved animal companions die, those four-legged family members are memorialized as well.

“The bond between pets and their families is very strong,” said Vivianne Villanueva, owner of Peaceful Paws Pet Cremation and Memorials and Into the Sunset Pet Transition Center, both located in Southern California. “Whether it is a

marker, a diamond, a special urn, a painting – pet owners want to remember and memorialize their pets. Memorialization allows them to continue on their grief journey and honor the life and love that was shared.”

Katie Koeweler, director of marketing with Heart’s Companion Pet Memorial Center in Reno, Nev., noticed business has been on the rise, especially since the center’s staff has been busy educating the community and veterinary partners on the different memorialization options that are available. “We attribute the incline to the fact that people want more for their pets when it comes to honoring the lives they shared together,” she said.

By providing support and services

to grieving pet owners, death-care professionals can find themselves with new and appreciative customers – especially when they show compassion and empathy. “People tend to minimize the loss of a pet, but I never have. When you have a dog that lives with you for 10, 15, 20 years, that’s a member of your family,” said Samuel Domskey, vice president of Haym Salomon Memorial Park in Frazer, Pa., and director of Friends of Noah Memorial Park, also in Frazer.

While offering pet loss services or pet sections in a cemetery can certainly help add revenue, it’s not something that should be taken lightly. In fact, many people in the field strongly believe that being a pet owner – or at the very least, a true animal lover – is crucial to offering these types of services. “You can’t fake feelings. You can’t fake thinking that you care,” said Mark Meinholz, owner of Memorial Pet Services in Middleton, Wis. “You can kind of see a difference between people that don’t really know pets and ones that are pet people.” And if you can tell the difference, you can bet that your customers will be able to as well.

“Unless you’re a pet parent who has gone through these emotions, you can’t truly empathize with the family looking to you to guide them in their darkest hours,” said Cherie Fry, owner and founder of Paws to Angels Pet Loss Center in Omaha, Neb. “Being a pet parent and feeling the human-animal bond, knowing what it feels like to have the unconditional love of a pet who doesn’t judge you for who you are, what you look like, the mistakes you make, who will turn even the hardest of times into a smile and wants nothing more than to love you; that is something that can never be shown, it is something that is felt w

with the heart,” she said.

When selecting employees for a pet loss operation, you should pick people who love pets and who are compassionate, Villanueva said. “I think both of these go hand-in-hand,” she said. “In my opinion, if you do not like animals, or appreciate the bond that they form with their family, you certainly won’t understand their grief.” On more than one occasion, Villanueva said she’s heard that losing a pet was worse than losing a human companion. “Pet owners look to you for comfort and guidance,” she said.

Burial versus Cremation

Only a small percentage of pet owners in the U.S. opt for full-body burial for their furry companions. But for Domsky, that small percentage – 1 percent, according to recent findings from the Pet Loss Professionals Alliance – was enough to justify establishing Friends of Noah Pet Memorial Park. “For those people that feel strongly about it, it’s nice for them to have a place they can visit,” he said. “That was part of the decision when I thought about doing this, and the owner of the facility was very supportive of it.”

Domsky acknowledges full-body pet burials aren’t for everyone. Before deciding to add a full-body pet section to a cemetery, owners and managers should assess their community’s demographics and determine whether or not the proposed section of land would be better served for pets versus humans. “I’m also looking at a wealthier clientele when it comes to pet burials,” he added. “If people are going to have the disposable income to spend on a pet, pet site and pet burial, it’s usually those that have the ability to afford it and probably the same people that spent thousands of dollars at the vet to care for their loved one.”



Memorial Pet Services in Middleton, Wis., offers many different memorialization items for pet owners, including personalized urns, like the one below. (Photo courtesy of Mark Meinholz)



Domsky started offering pet burial services in 2005, and believes that, if a cemetery has the permission to do so, an interested community and the right kind of land for it, providing pet burials is a positive thing. “It’s only going to make your facility look even brighter and better to the community, and more welcoming,” he said. “I’m proud of creating something that has a legacy, and our pet memorial park is always going to be here.” He added that when families contact him and are interested in cremation services, he

refers them to someone he has gotten to know in the community.

Burial packages at Friends of Noah include an interment site; combination pet casket and liner; a flat granite memorial including the pet's name, dates and one emblem or flat carving of the pet; and a blanket with the pet's picture on it. The blanket is provided through a partnership with Funeral Home Gifts, a company that makes tribute blankets. When Domsky meets with families, he asks them to bring him one or two pictures of the pet, which is then woven into a blanket and sent to the family within a matter of days. "It's almost always the best part of the package," Domsky said. "It's a nice additional keepsake. I thought the blanket was an emotional piece of the puzzle that really helped families grieve. They couldn't hold their dog, but they could wrap that blanket around themselves and feel like their pet was there."

Pet owners who choose to cremate their four-legged friends are no less interested in memorialization. "People will go out of their way to memorialize their pet in the way they want to, regardless of what the cost of it may be," Meinholz said. Some popular options pet owners tend to gravitate toward include urns, personalized rocks and markers, jewelry, shadow boxes and memorial blankets. Using the pet's paw or nose prints on different items is also popular.

Meinholz likes to work with local artists when offering memorialization products. "There are always lots of artists in everyone's communities," he pointed out. "They can definitely come up with a lot of ideas that really personalize that pet and make it an individual experience for everyone."

Everyone has different visions of how they want to memorialize their pet, Koeweler said, adding that staff

at Heart's Companion makes a point of asking pet owners clarifying questions to help determine what memorialization options are the best for them. "All those factors come into play in choosing what's best to help them honor the life they shared with their pet," she said. "At Heart's Companion, pet parents tend to gravitate to a variety of products. They range from our custom pet paw print to a simple urn to a piece of jewelry that holds a lock of fur or cremains. It all depends on their personal preferences. We educate our customers on all options to help fit their desire to memorialize their beloved pets."

Whether a family opts for cremation or full-body burial, pet death-care professionals stress the importance of involving the entire family in the process – including children. "With children, the loss of a pet is often the first experience with death, and having them involved in



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picking out memorialization pieces will have an enormous impact on how the child grieves the loss,” Fry said.

Meinholz has children, and when a family pet dies, he involves them in the process. “It definitely helps them understand death,” he said. He holds a memorial with his children, and provides each one with a clay paw print of the deceased pet. “The kids took them to school the next day, talked about them and had a good experience with it,” he said.

Get the Word Out

One of the most common things families tell pet loss professionals is that they didn’t know what they could actually do in terms of memorializing their pets. “So many times I’ve been told, ‘If only I knew this was an option,’ or ‘No one ever said I could do this.’ You feel horrible for them, because this was their pet, their loved one, and they

did not know all the different options that were out there,” Meinholz said. Meinholz’s own experience with an elderly pet led him to get involved in the pet loss profession.

“One of my pets was getting up in age, and I was looking around to see what options I had out there. My pet had been around for many years, and I wanted to make sure he was treated and handled with care, the way I would want him to be, and I wasn’t finding what I had hoped,” Meinholz said.

Fry faced a similar dilemma when her Chadz, her dog (who she lovingly refers to as her pet child), died on New Year’s Eve 2009. “I have always asked questions when it came to anything in her life, whether it was food, health care or behavior issues, and when she died it was no different,” Fry said. “Nobody could or would take care of her body in the way I wanted and in a way that she deserved. She was family, not waste.”

Fry added that “we are a death-avoidant society,” and no one wants to think or talk about death, especially when it comes to pets. “It seems worse because we have so few years with them,” she said. “Then, when a pet dies, we don’t know what to do. We have only ever had one option, and that was to take them to the veterinarian and leave the responsibility of our pet’s death to the veterinarian. Few families look into the options that may be in their community.”

One way to get pet lovers onto your grounds is to partner with other organizations in the pet community, such as shelters, rescue groups or groomers. “Definitely look into holding events. Make it an annual event commemorating the holidays or blessing of the pets,” Villanueva suggested. “Approach your local veterinary specialty hospitals, and offer to do a memorial service for their deceased patients. Pet owners appreciate those events where their loss



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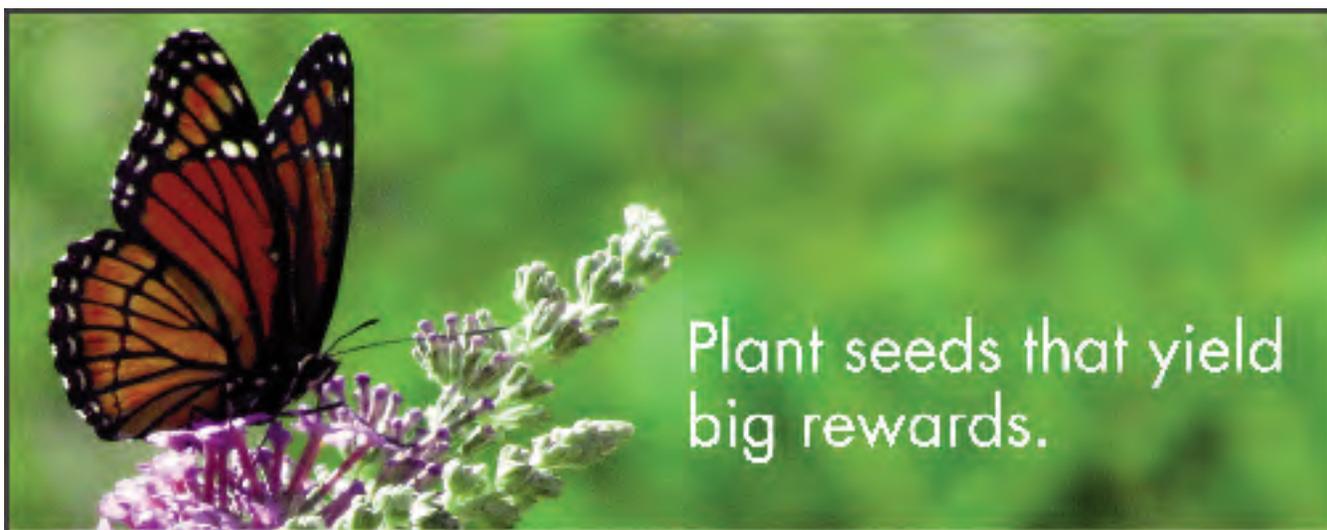
and grief is recognized.”

In addition to working with animal-oriented groups in the community, Koeweler suggests branching out and participating in other types of events. “One of our best branding efforts at Heart’s Companion was participating in a Women’s Expo – a non-pet event,” she said. “Our booth attracted many people from all walks of life. We spoke with those seeking information about planning ahead to those that simply were curious about a pet memorial center and what it has to offer to the community.”

One of the keys to marketing a pet cemetery, Domsy believes, is through networking with veterinarians. It can be quite a challenge, he admits, especially when veterinarians receive payment for cremation referrals. “Some tend to overlook or even avoid the opportunity for family members that want a different choice,” he said.

Domsy reaches out to veterinarians in his community simply by walking into their clinics or offices and introducing himself. “I gave them our brochures and cards, and just told them

we are here in the community,” he said. Domsy added that he doesn’t give any financial incentives to veterinarians that refer families, but he does offer a donation to the local chapter of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in the veterinarian’s name. “Many are amenable, but one vet said it was a total waste of money,” he said. “I walked out of the office, just thinking to myself, ‘Really? They spent years and years with you spending money to care for their pet and they wouldn’t want a permanent place of remembrance?’” •



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