



The Loss of a Pet

Your Pet Sitter Can Help

by Ellen Price, Editor

Does anyone really understand how important your companion animals are to you? They're family members and, as such, play an important part in your life. When you need cheering up, they play the clown—or quietly offer comfort and moral support. When you're happy, there's no one else who is happier for you—nor anyone as willing to share that happiness so openly and unselfishly. There's no other living being on earth who provides the unconditional love of your pets. Sometimes it's difficult for others to see that, isn't it?

But there **is** someone who understands—your pet sitter. Your family pet sitter doesn't simply provide

impersonal pet care. She (or he) understands the bond you have with your pets and probably has established a loving relationship with them as well. That's why there's no one who shares your hurt like your pet sitter when a beloved companion animal dies.

Listen to the words of these PSI members as they relate some of their most heartfelt stories.

Leslie Ray, Angel Pet Sitters Inc., Springdale, AR: "I've had very close relationships with several clients' pets that have passed on. It is **never** easy, and it's one of the most sorrowful aspects of my job.

Then again, I do try to concentrate on the positives, and I feel incredibly blessed to have been a part of that pet's life, even if only for a short time, and even though my role may have been small. I have such fond memories of some of these pets! I get misty thinking about them, but at the same time, my heart just fills to overflowing when I recall special moments.

"One of those memories is of Domino. He was a very old Dalmatian, with cataracts and very stiff, arthritic legs. He was in such bad shape that I would cry every time I left a visit. He couldn't walk...he had to do a lurching, hopping movement to maneuver himself. It was so pitiful that

I couldn't even watch him. I lived in fear of his falling over, but he didn't like to be helped. He wanted to do it on his own. I would go out into the yard and call him, making sure there were no toys or lawn chairs in his way, because he couldn't see where he was going. Outside, he would wander around for ages before he felt comfortable enough to eliminate. When we would go back inside, he would literally plop down on his bed, he'd be so worn out from the trip outside. I would bring him a treat and sit next to him, massaging his legs and talking softly to him. He loved it when I would sing (poor guy—I sing like a crow, but he put up with it). The last time I saw Domino, I actually prayed that God would take him; he was in so much pain and so tired. His mom called me a couple of days later to tell me that she was ready to let him go, and wanted me to know how much she appreciated my patience in caring for him. When she hung up, I cried for over an hour. I still miss dear Domino...he was a grand old man."

Kim Sauer, Sit n' Stay Pet Services, Hamburg, NY: "We've been in business long enough now that we're having to say goodbye to quite a few of our regular clients' pets, unfortunately. It's really sad. You get so attached seeing them daily for several years that it definitely is a downside to the business.

"We pet sat a long time for one particular household that was a special needs household. The owner had a lot of anxiety problems. We had to be there at a special time each day and had to call her at the end of our visit. Her dog was older, and had digestive problems, needing medications and a special lunch each day. We took care of him for more than five years and saw him age gracefully. But when it got to the point that he had stopped eating, and could hardly walk anymore on

his own, his owner knew it was time to say goodbye. She invited me over to spend some time with them. We sat outside and let him enjoy some time under his favorite tree. I took a plant to her to place under the tree to remember him by. We talked about the funny stories we remembered about him and we cried together. I offered to go with her to the vet, but she wanted to go alone. That was a very difficult day but one that I will never forget. It was really nice to get to say goodbye. He was a regular part of my life for so many years and I had cared about him as if he were my own dog."

Kara Lashley, Kritter Kare by Kara LLC, Huntersville, NC: "Jake was a rescue mix who lived with a single client of mine. Jenny adopted Jake even though she knew he had severe epilepsy among other issues. She was as devoted as any dog mom I have ever met! She kept him on his meds and would try the latest advances in medical science for Jake whenever possible. She took him to do all of the things he loved to do like walks and going to visit her parents and buying special food and treats that would not upset his stomach. Whenever possible, Jenny took Jake with her when she would travel. If that was not an option, then I would stay at her home and take care of Jake for her. Nothing was too good for him and she only wanted the best and to make sure that whoever took care of him could also handle all of his medical issues. Jake had developed severe hip dysplasia in his later years and Jenny was very responsible in making sure everything was done to help with the situation. Over the summer Jake became ill, with recurring prostate and hip problems as well as his epilepsy. Jenny worked with her veterinarians to give Jake a quality of life and not just quantity, but Jake's hips finally had all they could take. Jenny had to make one

of the hardest decisions of her life and had Jake put to sleep. Jake and Jenny were the reason I started offering overnight stays to clients who had babies with special needs. I feel very privileged to have had Jake and Jenny as clients and as friends and would not trade for the times I got to spend with Jake and take care of him."

Rob Nager, Decadent Dog Inc., Needham, MA: "Dealing with the death of a client's pet is a really important and difficult part of this job. In all the excitement of making the decision to follow my heart and enter the world of professional pet sitting, the thought that my new friends would pass on never crossed my mind. Consider that the average dog lives 10-11 years and multiply that by the number of dogs we care for and this is a huge setup for heartache!

"My friend Sam is the most vivid example. Sam was a 10 year-old,



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108-lb. German shepherd dog who, from the minute we met, was “my” dog. Although I respect people’s beliefs in reincarnation I never truly believed until the day I met Sam. We had met before and it was obvious to us both. Sam had hip dysplasia which got progressively worse over the next three years. Finally the time had come for poor Sammy, he was having trouble getting up and was in increasing amounts of pain that the meds could not cope with. His mom Robin called to let me know that the vet was coming to put Sam down at home and they wanted to let me know that I was welcome to be there if I wished. I thought about it for a while and decided to be with my big baby boy as he left the earth. The

in business, many of my first clients’ pets are passing away. It hurts the most since they were my starter pets, the ones I walked every day for years. I have had clients call to talk through their decision to have their pet euthanized, I have accompanied many clients for their final trip to the vet, and I have cried with many of them when they called to tell me their pet passed away. When you see a pet every day—or even several times a month—you develop a bond, and I take it just as hard as my clients when they pass away. One of my long-term clients, Dutchess, a Siberian husky, recently passed away. She was 14, but she was only 5 when I started walking her. A few days after she died, I had to go

sibly just a matter of days and they were given options for in-home care or euthanasia. The family chose in-home care and asked for my assistance. During the illness, the family and I had many lengthy telephone conversations and several discussions at their home regarding the pros and cons of euthanasia and how to know when the time was right. I cared for the dog several times a day for the last few days of her life. She had been a family pet for more than 10 years and her family became so distressed over seeing her ill that by the last few days of her life, I had become her primary caretaker. I saw that her quality of life was not what it had been and that she was becoming less and less of the beloved, happy, healthy dog that we had known for so many years so I told them that I truly felt it was time for them to let her go. They spent the evening with her and she was euthanized the next morning. Before the euthanasia, I prepared them with literature regarding cremation and pet burial and afterwards I sent them a sympathy card, had a memorial placed in the humane society newsletter, made donations in their dog’s memory to local rescue groups and placed a stone in my pet memorial garden. The family was very appreciative. I was thankful to them for allowing me to become a small part of their family.”



fact that Sam’s family invited me to be a part of their family on that day touched me more than I could ever express in words. We cried together and still talk about Sam as though he is very much alive and with us, I know that he is with me constantly and am grateful for the ability to have said goodbye in person.”

Beth Greenberg, All Friends Pet Care, Herndon, VA: “After 10 years

care for Savannah the cat, the only remaining pet in the home. As soon as I walked into the house, it was like walking in quicksand. Dutchess’s absence hit me really hard.”

Debra Milton, Four Paws Pet –Sitting Service, Douglasville, GA: “One of my canine clients became ill very suddenly due to cancer. The family was informed that the dog could live a couple of weeks or pos-

PSI members tell us that one of the most difficult parts of their job is dealing with their own feelings while trying to help their clients. “We, too, are grieving for a close friend, a pet with whom we were extremely close but who was not technically ‘ours’,” Rob Nager explained. “It can be a challenge to mourn while observing the fact that the family’s space must always be respected. Often the families will invite us to participate in the process alongside them, which is

wonderful. However, if they do not, we are extremely careful to keep a professional distance. It is a gift to know these wonderful animals and usually our assistance to their families continues after the animals have left us."

Helping to Heal

Yes, pet sitters share your feelings of loss and deal with many of your same emotions on the loss of a pet. This is why your pet sitter can be a valuable ally in this time of personal grief. And, as you can see from Debra's story, there are many things pet sitters do to comfort and support clients who are grieving over the death of a pet.

In addition to sympathy cards and letters, your pet sitter is capable of providing a wide variety of grief support and pet-loss counseling services. They can help you face a very trying and stressful time when it comes. And, with the life expectancies of our companion animals being what it is, this is something all pet owners must deal with eventually.

Standing By

Just knowing they're not alone can provide an emotional boost for grieving pet parents, according to Debra Milton. "In many cases where pets are terminally ill, I will provide their pet parents with books and articles regarding pet loss and how to cope," she said. "I also provide them with information regarding pet loss counseling in the Atlanta metro area—one-on-one counseling, group counseling, Internet groups and such. The more resources you can offer the pet parents, the better, because not everyone fits into one category."

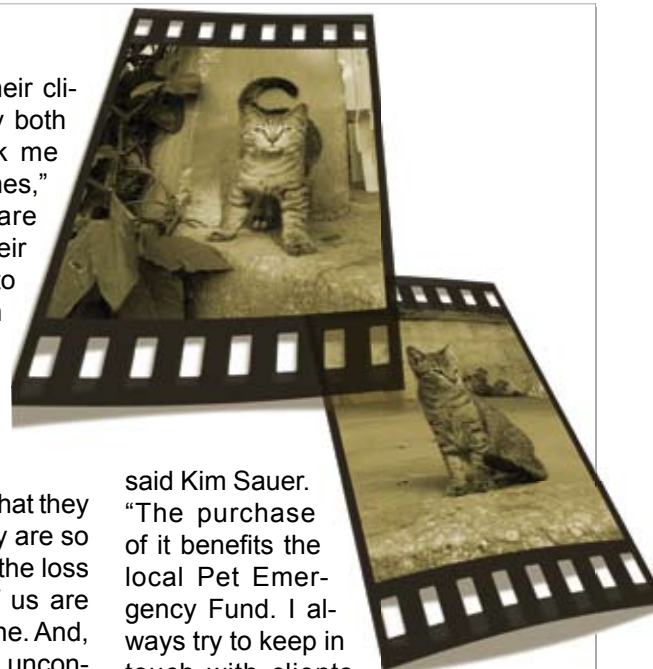
When dealing with euthanasia, having someone to accompany you to the veterinary clinic or to be with you during an in-home procedure can be a blessing. Many pet sitters

gladly offer to do this for their clients—and for the pets they both love. "I've had clients ask me about euthanasia many times," Leslie Ray noted. "They are torn, because they love their pets, and feel guilty having to decide whether to let them go or not. I always offer to go with a client if they are taking a pet to the vet to be 'released.' I always assure my clients that their grief is an important part of life and that they should not feel bad that they are so overcome with sorrow over the loss of a pet. After all, some of us are closer to our pets than anyone. And, a pet's love is so pure and unconditional, it's to be expected that we will grieve for them. I always send sympathy cards to clients who have lost a pet."

Kara Lashley agreed, saying, "I always offer to accompany any client to the vet when it comes time to make that final decision or to be with them when they go to say goodbye. When clients tell me they feel silly for feeling so much grief over the loss of their pet, I never hesitate to let them know that the grief they are feeling is all too real and painful and that they should never feel ashamed of grieving for something that was as important in their life as their pet had been to them. I always try to make myself available for anyone who has lost their pet and just needs to talk, cry, share stories and pictures and remember the many good times they have had with one another. They will always hold special places in our hearts and can never be replaced."

Precious Memories

Most pet sitters are camera-savvy and enjoy taking photos of their clients' pets. When a pet passes away, these photos can become treasured memorials for its owners. "I send a sympathy card with a gift certificate for a stone paw print photo frame,"



said Kim Sauer. "The purchase of it benefits the local Pet Emergency Fund. I always try to keep in touch with clients after they have lost a pet. I feel most of our clients are extended family and it is a hard time for both of us. Many of our clients have been ready to hear little paw prints again and we have met the new family members too!"

Rob Nager and Beth Greenberg both post pet memorials on their Web sites. "This is a lasting tribute to good friends of ours," Rob noted. (Visit Rob's site at <http://www.decadentdog.com/memorial.html>.)

Beth agreed, saying, "We have a pet memorial on our Web site, too. It serves as an outlet for our clients who have lost their treasured friends. Some of our staff pet sitters even compose the memorials for the pets they have cared for. You can view the page here: www.allfriendspet-care.com/Memorial.aspx."

We're All in This Together

As a pet owner who uses the services of a professional pet sitter, you're not alone when it comes to missing a beloved pet that has passed away. These passionate professionals are there to lend an ear, a shoulder or to wipe away a tear...their own, as well as yours. ■