



Planning a Memorial Event for Your Pet

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The second Sunday in September is Pet Memorial Day. In recent years, this date has become nationally recognized as a day to celebrate and remember the pets who have touched our lives. Many veterinary clinics, pet hospice programs, pet cemeteries and crematories, and even university veterinary teaching hospitals sponsor pet memorial events on this day. If your family lost a pet during the past year, it might be comforting for you to participate in a Pet Memorial Day event in your local area.

You can also plan a pet funeral or memorial ceremony of your own to mark the passing of your companion animal. This ceremony can take place immediately following your pet's euthanasia or several days, or even weeks, after your pet has died. If you feel your friends and family would benefit from the opportunity to say good-bye to your pet in a more formal way, here are some planning tips to keep in mind from Gail Bishop, Clinical Coordinator with the Argus Institute at Colorado State University's James L. Voss Veterinary Teaching Hospital (CSU-VTH). The Argus Institute hosts an annual pet memorial ceremony that is attended by dozens of veterinary team members and over 100 clients each year.

Pet Memorial Planning Tips

- **ask friends and family to attend.**

As soon as you can, contact your friends and relatives who may want to attend your pet's memorial event. Ask them to RSVP and to provide you with a favorite photo of them with your pet. If you have enough preparation time, you can use this collection of photos to create a wall collage, table top display, or memorial slide show for your event. To view an example of a pet memorial slideshow, visit <http://csucvmb.colostate.edu/vth/diagnostic-and-support/argus/Pages/pet-memorial.aspx>

- **focus on pet love more than pet loss.**

Of course, your memorial is about grieving, but it is also about healing. Be aware that people may be reluctant to attend if your program sounds like it will only be sad or depressing. Consider referring to your ceremony as a celebration of your pet's life and let people know that many of the activities you are planning will be uplifting.

- **know what will be said, who will say it, and when it will be said.**

If your ceremony is on a larger scale, take time to create a program of events. If welcoming statements, poems, meditations, prayers, or spoken memories will be part of your program, don't "wing it" the day of your event. Take time to choose them carefully and thoughtfully and then rehearse each piece prior to presenting them. Add variety by allowing time for everyone to participate via an activity, guided meditation, or open time for sharing.

- **make music part of your program.**

Music often moves people more than words. If you are acquainted with local musicians who are



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willing to perform an appropriate, meaningful song, schedule their music toward the beginning of your event to help set the mood for your program. If it is not possible for you to include live music, recorded music can be just as effective. Visit <http://www.candleinthefwindow.net/> for some ideas.

- **follow your formal program with time for informal mingling and fellowship.**

“Food and drink keeps people close and they stay awhile,” according to Bishop, “and that creates a healing experience that the formal memorial can only begin.” Bishop suggests replaying your slide show during this time or asking people to write their memories of your pet on a banner or poster made especially for the ceremony.

- **close the event with a token of love that people can take home.**

Flowers, Forget-Me-Not seed packets, pewter pocket stones with imprinted words, and small ceramic hearts stamped with a paw print are examples of take home tokens. You might also distribute a favorite photo of your pet. Giving each person a token serves two purposes: it signals the ending of your time together and provides an anchor for their emotions as they leave the memorial gathering site.

- **recruit assistance from friends, family and professionals who deal with pet loss.**

Planning and delivering a memorial program for your pet can take a lot of time and energy, so ask for help if you need it. Many pet cemeteries and crematories offer funerals and other ceremonies as part of their client services. Some even offer grave side services if you choose to bury your pet. Also, if it is appropriate, you can speak with your priest, minister, rabbi, or celebrant about conducting a pet memorial service for you.

Attending or conducting a pet funeral or memorial ceremony “publicly sanctifies and legitimizes the loss of a pet,” according to Bishop. “Normalizing this significant loss with a ceremony or celebration of life goes a long way toward helping you and your pet’s human family members heal.”

Bishop and her colleagues receive dozens of heartfelt thank you notes after every annual Pet Memorial Ceremony they host. As one pet parent said following their 2012 ceremony:

“We lost our pet in June and I hadn’t realized that I wasn’t healing. When I put Bear’s pictures together for the memorial, I cried while doing it. It made me so sad to look at his beautiful face. After the memorial, though, I was able to put these same pictures up and enjoy them without crying. I still miss him but now I can enjoy the years we had together and not tear up every time. Thank you so much for making that possible.”

A memorial service or funeral brings people together to honor and celebrate your beloved pet. They provide an opportunity to say good-bye and a chance to say, “thank you” for your pet’s many years of friendship, love, and pure devotion.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom[®] Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com