



Planning an Annual Event for National Pet Memorial Day

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In 1971, the membership of the International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories (IAOPCC) designated the second Sunday in September as 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.

If your veterinary hospital or animal care business is planning an event to mark this day, here are some points 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 memorial ceremony that is attended by dozens of veterinary team members and over 100 clients each year.

Pet Memorial Day Planning Tips

- **Start planning early.**

At least one month prior to your event, contact your clients who lost a pet during the past year. Ask them to register to attend your event and to provide you with a tribute photo of their pet. Be sure to include a deadline for receiving photos! Use this collection of photos to create a wall collage, table top display, or memorial slide show for your event. Be sure to add each animal's name to their photos!

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

Of course your event is about memorializing and grieving, but it is also about healing. People may be reluctant to attend if your program sounds like it will be sad or depressing. Colorado State University calls their program "Celebrating the Animals We Have Loved" and many of the readings and stories from clients are uplifting and even humorous.



- **Know what will be said, who will say it, and when it will be said!**

In other words, take time to create a schedule and 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 in public. Add variety by allowing time for audience participation via an activity, guided meditation, or open microphone sharing of memories.

- **Consider live music as part of your program.**

Music often moves people more than words. If your budget allows, audition local musicians and hire one to perform an appropriate, meaningful song. Schedule 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.



(Cont.)

- **Follow your formal program with time for informal mingling and fellowship.**
“Food and drink keeps them close and they stay awhile,” according to Bishop, “and that creates a healing experience that the formal program can only begin.” Bishop suggests replaying the slide show during this time or asking people to write their sentiments about their pets on a banner or poster made especially for the event.
- **Close the event with a token of love that clients 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. Distributing these signals an end to your time together and provides an anchor for your clients’ emotions as they leave the memorial gathering site.
- **Recruit assistance and financial sponsorships.**
Planning and producing an annual Pet Memorial program can require a lot of time and energy, not to mention money! Enlist help and support from the in-home euthanasia practices, pet hospice programs, pet cemeteries and crematories, and other pet-related businesses in your areas. You may be surprised at the number of businesses that will be honored to help you with such a meaningful event.
- **Don’t forget to promote your event.**
Send invitations to clients three weeks prior to your event, asking them to bring memorabilia (e.g. framed photos, ClayPaws® prints, favorite toys) to display on a table during the ceremony. You can also post signs in your waiting room and on your clinic’s website to remind clients of the date and to alert others who may want to attend. Remember to keep your invitations positive and uplifting. Using words like, “please join us to remember animals, big and small, who have touched our hearts and shaped our lives” (CSU-VTH, 2013) set a warm and inviting tone for your event. You may also want to add a line that says something like, “with regrets, we ask that you please leave pets at home” so your clients don’t arrive with their other pets.
- **Remember to feel good about what you’ve contributed.**
According to Bishop, “pet memorial ceremonies publicly sanctify and legitimize the loss of a pet. A public setting that normalizes this significant loss goes a long way toward helping people heal. Who better to offer that than veterinarians and their staff members who ‘get it’?”

Bishop and her colleagues receive dozens of heartfelt thank you notes after every Pet Memorial Ceremony. As one client 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, 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.”

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