

COMINGS & GOINGS: CARMEL

Honoring a cherished pet

Woman's personal need was impetus for funeral business

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People who treat their pets like children will understand how Coleen Ellis feels.

Her little Mico, a black, brown and cream colored terrier and schnauzer mix, died during surgery last year after a life of 14 years as a close member of the family.

Ellis, who had worked about 15 years in the human funeral industry, missed her Mico -- whom she often refers to as "baby" -- and began to wonder why there are no similar funeral services for pets.

"I had been thinking about this idea earlier, but Mico's death kind of catapulted me over the top, so I decided to see what I could do that would at least give people an option when their pet dies," Ellis said.

The Greenwood woman's idea has blossomed into a new business in Carmel: Pet Angel Memorial Center at 172 East Carmel Drive in Hunters Run shopping center. The business opens officially Friday.

Local television personality and humorist Dick Wolfsie will be there signing copies of his newest book that was unleashed by fond memories of his longtime beagle sidekick Barney, who died last year.

Ellis has heard some of the snickering from people who don't understand why anyone would want a funeral or memorial for their dead dog, cat, gerbil, rabbit or other pet.

"As Mico's life came to an end, we just felt she deserved a dignified and meaningful funeral, where we could celebrate what she had meant to us," Ellis said.

Others in the Hamilton County pet-care industry understand completely and agree there is a need for a pet funeral service.

"I think it is a lovely idea. It is a special and needed niche in the business," said Becki Bradford, owner of the Pet Co. in Carmel, a pet-sitting service with more than 700 clients in the north suburban area. "Animals have become such an important part of our families, that it is important to have a way to say goodbye.

"We've been in the (pet-sitting) business over 15 years, and we've had to deal with the passing of many senior pets. Some people don't understand the grief and the need to have an outlet."

Ellis added that a pet memorial can be an opportunity to help children understand how to cope with a loss.

Much like the human version of a funeral home, Pet Angel will offer



When Coleen Ellis lost her dog of 14 years, she wanted to celebrate its life. Her business, Pet Angel, which offers a complete line of funeral and cremation services, opens Friday in Carmel. She believes honoring deceased pets will become a trend. -- Charlie Nye / The Star

products and services to aid a grieving family. Packages of merchandise and services are priced from \$175 to \$450 or more plus the cost of a casket that ranges from \$114 to \$440.

Pet Angel, located in a strip shopping center, offers to pick up the deceased pet and hold it if the owners want to schedule a family gathering a few days later. There is no embalming, of the human type, although some grooming is possible.

Depending on family preferences, Ellis said Pet Angel will arrange for cremation and then later deliver the ashes to the family. Or, if there is to be burial in a pet cemetery, Pet Angel will arrange for a funeral procession.

Even though private, backyard burials of pets are common, Ellis said, "The law in most parts of Indiana prohibits a burial in your backyard."

There are a limited number of pet cemeteries in the state. One of the oldest is Memory Gardens in Lawrence, which was founded nearly 50 years ago and is the final resting place of more than 7,000 dogs, cats and other pets.

Pet Rest Gardens near Fort Wayne also markets its services through Indianapolis veterinarians and on the Internet.

Kent Reinhard of Pet Rest said, "We've been in business 20 years, and we've learned that most people are looking for someone they can trust to help them in a difficult time. Most people want an opportunity to say one last goodbye."

Ellis encourages pet owners to plan ahead before their Fluffy or Spot dies.

That can mean having a portrait-quality photo taken, which Pet Angel will have printed on canvas and framed. "It is a nice picture besides a remembrance of our pet," Ellis said.

A short video or DVD can be compiled from family-provided photos and made as a memorial to a pet.

Or, pet sculptures can be arranged through Muncie artist F.B. Fogg.

If a family wants to bury its pet, Ellis has appropriate plastic or wooden caskets, lined and filled with pillows.

Or, if a family chooses cremation, there is a wide choice of urns to hold the ashes. There are copper and brass or pearl-covered containers that look like scaled-down versions of human-sized urns.

The shop also sells decorative urns, shaped like delicate brass dogs or cats that are hollowed out and can contain ashes. There are flower vases that can contain ashes in a hollow base and flowers in the top.

Much like urns for human use, the shop has small, wooden cases with brass nameplates. Hollowed rocks that can hold pet ashes and are fitted with an engraved brass nameplate can be placed outdoors in a garden.

In addition, Ellis said, a copy of a nose or paw print can be engraved on a bright silver charm for necklace or bracelet.

"Not everything is necessarily for after a pet is deceased, Ellis said. Some items -- such as the photo portraits or nose prints -- are nice for pet lovers anytime, Ellis said.

While some people think pet funerals are frivolous, she said they help others deal with the loss of a friend who gave them unconditional love. She predicted the concept will catch on.

"Ten years from now, the idea will not seem unusual or extreme. It will be the natural thing to do."