

Animals break your heart just once

Coleen Ellis provides memorial services for beloved pets

Paul F. P. Pogue

Coleen Ellis had been an animal lover all her life, but it was the death of her beloved dog Mico, whom she still calls her baby, in 2003 that inspired her to start up Pet Angel Memorial Center, 172 E. Carmel Drive, in September of 2004.

A shrine to Ellis' beloved dog Mico, who died in 2003 and inspired her to start Pet Angel, overlooks the main hall.

“This is actually something that has been in my head for five years,” Ellis said. “In the funeral business, knowing of my love of pets, I used to look around and ask what could we do for the four-legged?”

Eighteen years in the human funeral business, working with families to plan funerals, served her well in setting up Pet Angel.

“Helping families in a very helpless time and helping them come up with something to make them feel better in the loss of a loved one — that’s what I love to do,” she said. “Doing that on the human side, and then transferring it to the pet side, it’s the same thing. These are family members. If I can bring a little bit of comfort and peace to their hearts in a time when they feel very helpless, that’s my mission.”



She’s done memorial services for all kinds of animals, from dogs and cats to guinea pigs. “Far be it for me to say what’s a pet and what’s not a pet.”

Most of Pet Angel’s business has come from word of mouth and friends of friends. The memorial can be expensive — custom statues are not cheap — but doesn’t necessarily have to be.

“You don’t have to have a funeral. You don’t have to have the whole process. What I bring to you is helping you and your pet in whatever way you want me to help you. I help with the whole death care process.”

It’s a reminder of the uncomfortable fact, the same idea of human mortality that we try not to think about: Sooner or later, and probably sooner than you’d like, the purring ball of fuzz in your lap is going to die. A grim thought, but one that must be accepted as inevitable.

“The biggest thing is, this happens to all of us,” Ellis said. “You don’t want to think about it, but your pet is going to die. We do a lot of preplanning of families calling and saying, ‘I need to get prepared. I want to know what happens and that this is what’s going to take place.’”

Consider: What's the one episode of *The Cosby Show* everyone remembers? That time the goldfish died and they held a funeral in the bathroom. Funny, but also touching. When a pet dies, it leaves a hole in your heart, a hole shaped like a dog or cat who's never going to be jumping into your lap again.

"When I talk about the families that need something like this, it's the families that look at the pet as a member of their family," Ellis said. "If somebody has an animal and it's just an animal to them, then this is probably more than what you need. What I do is smother you with grief support. Eighty-three percent of pet owners refer to themselves as 'mommy and daddy' with their pets. That should tell you something of how connected they are to the pets."

She believes this kind of service is important not only for the pet owner at the time, but for their relationships with future pets.

"A proper goodbye is important," Ellis said. "When you have these people who say, 'I lost my dog three years ago and I can never go through that again,' that means they probably didn't get the chance to grieve properly. It was not just a dog, not just a cat, it was your baby, a part of your family. People will break your hearts all the time. Animals break your heart just once. It's about doing whatever you need to help the family be comfortable in a difficult time. A lot of it is the guidance part of it. People are helpless and sometimes they want to be told what to do. It's about telling them, 'It's OK to cry, it's OK to grieve. Those babies have depended on you for five, 10, 15, 20, even 22 years, and now you're not being depended on. It's OK to cry. It's OK to grieve. It's OK to do all that stuff.' If there is a child that's struggling, I really encourage the parents to bring the child in. I want to be able to answer the questions professionally for them. I want them to be able to understand the process."

They follow up the memorials by staying in contact with the families, providing them whatever resources and reading materials they need, and twice-monthly grief counseling sessions.

They feature many, many ways to commemorate lost pets — etchings, custom sculptures, charm bracelets with cremains in them, necklaces with metal etchings of paw prints or nose prints. The urns alone come in a variety of shapes and sizes, from traditional jars to flower pots.

"We have all these urns up here on the shelf to show people that they don't have to just be urns, they can also be beautiful pieces of art," Ellis said.

Her work is definitely a 24/7 job, picking up animals at all hours when necessary.

"Sometimes it may happen at 2:30 in the morning," she said. "Death doesn't know time nor does it know holidays. We have had vets that have come in here and performed euthanasias in here, so that the whole death care process begins here."

Pet Angel itself is a quiet place, solemn but not somber. It's a comforting place, really, with different rooms for viewing and remembering. Overlooking it all is the shrine to Mico; in a way every one of these ceremonies is a remembrance of Mico, at least for her.

“When I do what I do, not a day goes by that I don’t get emotional,” Ellis said. “The day I stop being emotional is the day I change professions. The one thing I can say to these people is that I know what you’re going through. I do what I do here because this is what Mico deserved. This is how I would have wanted to be treated when my baby died. I’m emotional right with them.”

It’s not about putting them in the ground or in a bag; it’s about memories, about something more than just the physical remains, about finding peace and acceptance of the new way of things.

“Families come in here and we sit here and we talk about the animals there. I ask, ‘Tell me about the funny things your animal does and the tricks they’d do.’ When you get to the point of acceptance and you can smile and say, ‘I remember when they did this or that,’ that’s where you want to be.”

One of the remembrance kits she sells sums it all up with a quote from Chief Seattle: “If all the beasts were gone, we would die from great loneliness of spirit.”

For more information check out www.petangelmemorialcenter.com.