

Startup Sells Farewells to Fido And Fluffy
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In the growing market for increasingly personalized funeral services, four-legged family members aren't being forgotten.

Businesswoman Coleen Ellis on Aug. 20 opened Pet Angel Memorial Center. It appears to be the first full-service pet funeral home in Indiana and one of a handful of businesses in the nation that offer funeral services for a departed dog or cat.

From Pet Angel's 1,200-square-foot storefront on East Carmel Drive, Ellis is mounting a twofold mission: to change the way people view the grieving process for a lost pet and to tap into an exploding pet-care market.

In 2004, U.S. residents are expected to spend \$34.3 billion on their pets, double the amount spent in 1994, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. "As you look at what's going on with baby boomers and empty nesters, animals are becoming our babies," Ellis said. "That's driving a lot of what's going on here."

Ellis speaks from her own experience. A veteran of the funeral pre-planning industry, she had considered a pet funeral home for years. Last year, the death of her beloved mixed-breed dog, Mico, prompted Ellis and her husband, Brian Burke, to start Pet Angel.

Pet owners often are offered cremation services through their veterinarians when a pet dies. If owners don't care to have their pet's ashes returned, pets are cremated en masse. In some areas, owners may also take their pets' bodies home for burial, but that practice is illegal in some cities, including Carmel and Indianapolis.

Those options didn't satisfy Ellis, who refers to Mico as "my baby."

She began contacting her sources on the human side of the funeral business with a goal of bringing the same sort of onestop service to pet owners that humans have at funeral homes. That includes picking up the pet's body and suggesting grief counseling resources, she said, to leading a procession to the cemetery.

The company's pricing structure also resembles that at human funeral homes, albeit less expensive. Customers can pick from one of three packages or from a list of items available. Caskets, for instance, range from \$114 for a small clothcovered model, to a golden-retriever-size \$396 casket/vault combination that meets the same ground-protection requirements as a human version. Likewise, urns start at about \$30 and top out at more than \$300.

Pet Angel's store also has a chapel where a pet's human and non-human friends can

gather for a memorial service. The room, decorated in warm, earth tones, is furnished with a fireplace and wooden benches. The benches face a table where Ellis has displayed a miniature casket. For a service, Ellis explained, the animal would be wrapped in a soft blue blanket embroidered with his or her name.

Ellis acknowledges she has little idea of how large the market for her service may be, but she's banking on others like her wanting to honor and remember their pet.

Although large companies haven't yet entered the pet funeral business, a growing number of human-oriented companies are also recognizing a need for pet death care.

Batesville-based Hillenbrand Industries Inc., owner of Batesville Casket Co., in 2001 launched its Lasting Friends division to cater to veterinary clinics and animal hospitals. The company has two locations, in Indianapolis and Lakeland, Fla., that offer cremation services and memorial products.

Minneapolis-based Kelco Supply Co. began offering pet-specific funeral supplies in 1998.

Lori Adamson, Kelco's advertising and marketing director, wouldn't disclose sales for the pet side of Kelco's business, but said it is growing every year.

"We didn't think it would get this big," she said. "People are willing to spend so much more on their animals and to treat them like their children."

Even though the idea of inviting family and friends to gather around Sparky for one last goodbye will be foreign to many people, Ellis said she believes the concept's time has come.

"Our goal is that 10 years from now, when your pet dies, of course you'll call the pet funeral home-what else would you do?"

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