

Memorial service held to celebrate the lives of pets

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Families across Fort Collins gathered Sunday in the Veterinary Teaching Hospital to celebrate a very important part of their lives - their pets. The memorial service was held for past patients of the CSU Pet Hospice Program, which helps and supports families with pets that have been diagnosed with terminal illnesses.

The program began in 2003 when veterinarians approached CSU with the proposition. It is now one of a dozen across the U.S. for pets, said Katie Kennedy, a junior veterinarian student.

"It really was the brain child of the vets around here," Kennedy said.

Any pet diagnosed with a terminal illness can be referred to this program, but cancer is the most common disease in their patients.

When a pet is put into the hospice program, it is assigned a team of volunteer student vets. The program is strictly a volunteer service and does not count as credit, so each student is participating in an extracurricular activity.

The team, the owner and the vet then decide on a weekly schedule for treatment.

When the team comes to the patient's house, they assist with any medications or treatments the pet needs, such as injections or fluid therapy, and talk to the family about illness or euthanasia. So far, the program has helped over 60 clients, and the memorial service was held to follow up with them and to celebrate the lives of their pets.

Live music by the students greeted families, and Reverend Peggy Christiansen began the service, which was followed by a slide show of the pets helped by the hospice program. As the pictures flashed by, attendees opened tissue packets and cried with their families.



Media Credit: Rachel Dembrun
Colorado State University students and Fort Collins residents took to Jack Christiansen Track Friday for the annual Relay For Life to raise money and promote cancer awareness. Teams circled the track for 12 hours from Friday night to Saturday morning.

The service moved on to poems and songs written by families, followed by a candlelit vigil. As each person's candle was lit, they murmured the names of pets they had lost. After a moment of silence and a few closing words from Christiansen, guests got refreshments and began talking with each other again.

Kimber Hawes attended the ceremony to celebrate the life of her cat, Tigger. He had been diagnosed with lymphoma and later diabetes and passed away in October.

In 1994, Hawes said, she and her husband had decided to get a cat. Adopting from a shelter was difficult. At first, they were told that they couldn't adopt out of concern for the cat's safety because they had two sons ages two and six.

They were also asked many specific questions, such as whether they were going to be moving soon after adopting.

"I said to Mike, 'I wonder if it's this hard to adopt a human child,'" Hawes said.

After repeated phone calls and perseverance, however, two-year-old Tigger became a part of their family. He was very gentle with their children, and seemed to have more patience for them than for adults. He approached house visitors, and came up to the door whenever someone came home.

As he aged, Tigger became a lap cat, cuddling with the family a lot more, and providing comfort to anyone who was feeling sad.

"He knew when you needed him to be affectionate," Hawes said.

When he was suddenly diagnosed with lymphoma, the family was forced to face the thought of death. The vet would not tell them how long Tigger would live.

They heard of the program at a CSU open house, and asked their vet about it. She had a team of vet students assigned to the Hawes family.

Tigger only needed some hydration therapy and shots once he was diagnosed with diabetes, so most of the team's efforts went into consoling the family. Euthanasia was always a looming possibility, and this was mostly what made the illness difficult to live with.

"It was good to have an objective set of eyes," Hawes said. "I didn't want to make those decisions."

The team seemed to have a positive effect on Tigger, however, and he surprised the vet with how long he lived. Hawes said the team invaluablely helped with his passing.

"You need to work through the process, not exist through the process," Hawes said.

Tigger passed away one morning shortly after he had been let outside for the day. Hawes said she felt grateful that two of her wishes had been granted - that he did not have to be euthanized, and that a family member was home at the time.

"We feel like he gave us those last two blessings," Hawes said. "I'm glad I was there with him."

Tigger was cremated, and his family took with them the lessons that he brought with him as they grew together: compassion, respect for animals, and ultimately, coping with the end of a life.

The hospice program was truly beneficial and emotionally supportive, Hawes said. Although Tigger's passing was difficult, the love and encouragement the family received from the volunteers was invaluable to their recovery, and now Tigger lives on as a powerful and happy memory.

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