

## Group forms to support owners of dying pets

### Marin's animal hospice

Rob Mitchell



When Shamu the cat was dying, he groaned day and night for four days.

Veterinarians told Lou Leet her cat, feeble from old age, was not in pain. So instead of euthanizing Shamu, she decided to let him die at home under her care.

"Admittedly, that was hard to take," said Leet, of Petaluma. "I could have used some help."

**TENDER CARE:** Lou Leet (left) and veterinarian Todd Czarnecki share a moment with 'Squeaky,' a 19-year-old feline who suffers from a variety of age-related maladies. Leet and Czarnecki are founding an animal hospice in Marin, BitterSweet, to help people with terminally ill pets. IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel

Now Leet, a Marin grief recovery specialist, has founded BitterSweet, a San Rafael-based nonprofit organization designed to help pet owners with dying animals. The nonprofit will hold its first meeting Sunday to recruit volunteers who will be trained in both animal hospice - managing palliative care for terminally ill animals - and providing support for grieving pet owners.

BitterSweet is the first organization in Marin to focus solely on end-of-life care for pets, although animal hospice has become a national trend.

Veterinarians such as George Walters of San Rafael have long helped clients deal with the loss of pets.

"When I go to someone's house, it's generally for euthanasia," said Walters, who has been in practice for 50 years. "We give hugs and do various things when we have to put animals down. It's the hardest thing we do." He does not make regular home visits.

Animal hospice is partly a response to improved veterinary care. Pet owners, who will spend more than \$35 billion on pets in 2005, up from \$17 billion in 1994, are willing to do more to extend the lives of their pets, and are demanding higher quality of medical treatment for the animals.

"The whole thing has changed completely from the days of penicillin only," Walters said. Procedures like dialysis, chemotherapy and organ transplants are now a regular part of veterinary medicine.

"These are things we just didn't do years ago," said veterinarian Rick Timmins of the University of California at Davis' School of Veterinary Medicine. Timmins cited a recent survey that found more than 85 percent of pet-owning households consider their pet "part of the family."

"The attachment people have for their pets has really evolved," Timmins said. Veterinary medicine is changing to address the changing relationship between people and their pets, he said.

Animal hospice is a new way of talking about what vets already do, said Bonnie Mader, at UC Davis' Pet Support Hotline. "It really allows people to come to terms with the mortality of their animals" in their own home, she said, "rather than looking across the exam table at their veterinarian."

Sheri Cardo of the Marin Humane Society said she would have welcomed some kind of veterinary home care when her 16-year-old dog was dying of cancer.

"She had the best possible care under the circumstances," Cardo said. "I gladly would have paid for some kind of in-home veterinary visits."

The Animal Care Center in Rohnert Park, which sees 10,000 animals a year, is investigating creating an animal hospice program of mobile veterinarians, nutrition education and grief counseling.

"Because there's no model, we're having to put it together on the fly," Hospital Administrator Kathy Yerger said. Staffers will go through human hospice training to better understand the

"death with dignity" philosophy.

BitterSweet will be a welcome resource for Marin, said Todd Czarnecki, a San Rafael veterinarian on BitterSweet's board of directors. He will help train BitterSweet volunteers to coordinate palliative care.

"This is not meant to replace veterinarians," he said. Volunteers will work in homes with people and their pets, in communication with veterinarians. "It's a really, really tough decision for people" to euthanize, Czarnecki said. Most veterinarians are unable to make home visits due to packed clinic schedules. The exception is for euthanasia. Unlike the Animal Care Center, BitterSweet will not have mobile veterinarian services.

"We really want that network," Leet said, referring to BitterSweet volunteers who will work with veterinarians. She hopes the nonprofit will ensure no one has to face grief alone, as she did.

"I found during the death process with Shamu that I really completed my relationship with him," she said. "There weren't those loose ends."