

go downhill without any intervention. I know Nova is going to die, and I have cried about that, and it is very stressful. But Nancy has helped with not only the medical side of the situation, but also with the emotional side."

Ruffing understands owners such as Landis aren't ready to let go. Usually, the pet lets its owner know when it's time, she says.

"Sometimes, we deceive ourselves in keeping an animal alive," says Landis, who also has Nova's brother, Normie, and four cats. "But Dr. Ruffing will guide you. She knows and understands how hard it is to let go. She will let you know when it's time, when the quality of life is deteriorating. And when the dog is suffering so much that it is time to be released. If I didn't have Dr. Ruffing, I would never be able to do this."

Nova is on eight medications and recently was diagnosed with high blood pressure. Landis is there by Nova's side because the dog was always there for Landis through a divorce and the death of her mother.

"You can't measure how much an animal gives you," Landis says. "They never ask for anything in return. Pets don't judge you. I can't imagine losing Nova. I just can't. She looks so beautiful. She doesn't even look sick. This is not fair."

Death is never fair, Friday says, but sometimes people want to keep their pet alive for their own sake and not the animal's. Friday is not surprised when he hears about the potential costs and the commitment by an owner to provide extra care for the animal in hospice.

"It is a very difficult thing to understand if you don't own a pet," he says. "People make such a connection with their pets."

Denise Azzari Marazzo of Shadyside had to say goodbye to two cats in eight days, Bellina, 11, and Mephistofeles, 17. Bellina died the same day Mephistofeles was being operated on. He died the following week. Ruffing's guidance helped her endure the stressful time by showing her ways to help, such as how to remove a catheter and administer pain medication. Azzari Marazzo says she wanted to do what she could for both animals to keep them alive and comfortable as long as it was the humane thing to do.

"Nancy (Ruffing) is a very kind, gentle spirit," Azzari Marazzo says. "She helped prepare me for this. She comforted me. She went the extra mile to help me -- from offering to take one of my cats to the vet's office to just listening to my story. She is such a special person. She allowed me to spend time with my cats after they passed away so I could say goodbye."

LETTING GO

There comes a time to let go, and that's when veterinarians guide owners with those end-of-life decisions, says Dr. Charles Dunn, medical director for Banfield, The Pet Hospital for Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and New York City.

"We give them guidance, and if they are interested in hospice, we help them find one that is supervised by a licensed veterinarian," he says. "We understand that this is an exceptionally difficult decision for people to face, and we help them determine the quality of life for their pet. We discuss treatment options for surgical or other medical options to help them decide what is right for them and their pet."

He can and does discuss end-of-life possibilities in the early stages of a disease, because he wants people to think clearly before making the decision to end a pet's life.

The choice is so difficult because dogs and cats have become "family" members, says Stephanie LaFarge, senior director of counseling for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"There are many questions to be raised about pet hospice," she says. "Intervention does not guarantee to prolong life with a quality of life. It is very hard for family members to say, 'Don't try anymore.' Some people will try everything."

There are some people who don't want to euthanize and just try to keep the animal comfortable and allow the animal to die naturally, she says. She recommends owners who are considering euthanasia to make an appointment weeks ahead so there is time for goodbyes.

AFTER A PET'S DEATH

Isolina Pendergast says her sister, Sonia Varrasso,

was so upset after euthanizing her Great Dane, Jade, she struggled to return home. Varrasso had gone to great lengths to care for Jade -- even driving to Cleveland in the middle of the night for the dog's treatment.

"This dog was just like Marmaduke," Pendergast says. "She adored that dog. My sister is the type of person who is a fixer, but she was not able to fix this. She spent a lot of money trying to save her dog. She did everything she could."

Varrasso learn to deal with Jade's death through the efforts of Deb Chebatoris, owner of Chartiers Custom Pet Cremation in Bridgeville.

Chebatoris sees firsthand how much a pet means in a person's life when she observes owners change work schedules or vacations to care for an ill pet. When the end has come, Chebatoris steps in.

"Being able to share in this time with a family is why I do what I do," Chebatoris says. "It's not easy. When I see a child upset, or a grown man cry, it makes me tear up. It is especially hard when pets have been killed by an accident, and people blame themselves, or the instance where I had 11-day-old dog who never really got to live."

Chebatoris helps celebrate the pet's life in a comfortable, soothing setting. Inside her business, a waterfall murmurs in the background while peaceful music serenades as owners relax on one of two plush couches or take a seat in a double rocker. One wall is decorated as a forest, with no clear path, because each owner deals with grief differently, she says. Photos of pets adorn tables, along with more than 300 urns to choose from to hold the cremains.

Families can choose to be present for the cremation, which can take as long as five hours.

"This place gives families a quiet place to grieve," says Chebatoris, who has cremated dogs, cats, a pot-bellied pig, a sugar glider, fish, parakeets, rats and mice. "These owners are emotionally devastated. Their grief is gut-wrenching."

Treating the animal's death with dignity and respect is what impressed Pendergast about Chebatoris. She wrapped the dog in a blanket and created a picture frame urn with the cremains placed in a specially made bag from the dog's favorite fabric.

"You don't think of the impact pets have on your life every day," Pendergast says. "But they do. The pain of the loss will dull and you learn to survive, but you never forget."

Andrea Weinheimer of Finleyville says her female border collie Boots, who was 13 when she died, was so loved in the neighborhood that people brought casseroles and sent cards. Boots loved soccer and barked when her team scored.

"When I had breast cancer and was getting chemo treatments Boots was right there with me. I was lying around a lot, and she never left my side. It was as if she knew I was sick and she didn't want to leave me" Weinheimer says.

Boots had arthritis, trouble walking, and suffered a stroke. "I didn't want her to suffer anymore," she says.

"I knew it was time when she was not able to walk anymore, and one day I picked her up and she licked me a few times, then put her head on my shoulder telling me, 'It's time.'"

Accepting that a pet is dying is difficult for people to imagine, says Kathy Dressler, manager of Rosedale Pet Cemetery in Verona. They often are in denial because that animal played such an important part in their lives.

"The people who come to visit the graves find comfort," Dressler says. A police officer who had his canine partner buried still visits. "These officers become incredibly attached to these dogs," she says. "These dogs save these police officers' lives. So the bond is incredibly strong. It is really moving to see these guys crying over the death of their police dog."

Dressler offers services, viewings and an opportunity for owners to be present at the burial, as well as pet caskets and grave markers.

"We help them with closure," Dressler says. "It gives them a chance to grieve and to be around people who understand, because we do understand. We know that these pets are family members."

There have been owners who have slept on the floor for months beside their pet to make sure he or she was OK, says Linda Nicely, owner of Hillview Pet Cemetery in Ligonier. That's the strength of the bond, she says. Her job is to listen to clients share

their stories.

"Sometimes we just sit and talk," she says. "A lot of people will say to me that they feel guilty over feeling so bad for losing a pet more than losing a relative. I think it is because you can talk to anyone about losing a person, but it is just becoming more acceptable to talk with someone about losing a pet. You never replace a pet, because each pet holds a special time in your life."

PETS BY THE NUMBERS

- 63 percent of households have pets, and 37 percent of pet owners consider their pets important family members.
- More than 70 million U.S. households own dogs or cats, and 45 percent of U.S. households own more than one pet.
- Consumer spending on pets has more than doubled, from \$17 billion in 1994 to an estimated \$38.4 billion in 2006, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association.

Source: Pawspice, American Animal Hospital Association, Rosedale Pet Cemetery, Chartiers Custom Pet Cremation, Pets Best Insurance.

COSTLY PET CARE

Pets can receive medical care, prescription drugs and diagnostics that were unheard of just a few years ago.

Veterinarians have access to increasingly sophisticated and costly diagnostic instruments, such as for MRIs and ultrasounds, which once were reserved for humans. Such screenings often detect problems that formerly would have gone undiagnosed. Because of the availability of these new treatment technologies, pets today are living longer, healthier lives.

While these screenings and treatments are great advancements, they can be very expensive. Once fatal conditions for pets are now treatable, but often costs can range from \$3,000 to \$10,000 to higher, according to Pets Best Insurance founder Dr. Jack Stephens. Pet insurance covers most procedures.

Stephens says he started his business because he wanted to offer affordable health insurance for pets who are ill or injured. "These pets are like a family member, and owners want a way to help keep them healthy with regular checkups and, if they need it, coverage for other health problems."

PET COSTS

A blood test: From \$50 to as much as \$100 for organ function blood tests.

A middle-of-the-night visit: Most emergency clinics have a \$75-\$100 office call for the nighttime examination. And then the doctor will itemize the patient's needs for the following 12-24 hours. The total can be in the thousands.

Feeding tube: \$300-\$375.

Oxygen: \$20-\$30 per hour, which would include supervision.

Cost to euthanize: For a 30-pound dog, with catheter and placement, sedative and euthanasia procedure, about \$65; if at the veterinary hospital, as much as \$100.

Pet funerals: \$400-800 depending on the size of the pet; includes burial plot, casket, opening and closing of the grave. Headstones are additional and vary in range and price.

Pet cremation: \$85-\$100 for a small animal and more for a larger pet. Urn for cremains: Most are \$60-\$90, but can cost \$1,500 for a sculptured bronze piece.

Pet insurance: \$30 per month average (range is \$10-\$50 per month)

Source: Pawspice, American Animal Hospital Association, Rosedale Pet Cemetery, Chartiers Custom Pet Cremation, Pets Best Insurance, Dr. Nancy Ruffing DVM.

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