

Home» Second Section» Feature: Good grief



After retiring from practice, Dr. Pan Parkinson, here at his office with office cat, Figaro, opened TenderHeart Pet Hospice, which specializes in end-of-life care for pets./Photo by Jennaye Derge.

Good grief Local veterinarian offers specialized end-of-life care for pets

by Jen Reeder

Like so many Durangoans, Ginger Jenks loves dogs. The author of *Wag, Live, Love: What Dogs*

Teach Us About Happiness and Life seeks joy with her pups in daily life and through special activities like agility competitions. Her dog Rory even garnered international recognition as one of the best agility Samoyeds in the history of the breed. So when Rory's health was failing last summer when he was 14 years old, she wanted him to be able to pass away comfortably at home.

"I do think it's a great gift that we can give our dogs to let them go gently and not wait until they're screaming in pain and dying on their own," Jenks said. "It's like ripping your own heart out. But I think most of us humans would say, 'When it's time to go, I'd sure like to go with the person I love most holding me and looking into my eyes and saying it's OK.' That's what dogs deserve. Because you know what? They give everything."

So Jenks got in touch with Dr. Dan Parkinson, a veterinarian who provides specialized end-of-life care for pets in La Plata County through TenderHeart Pet Hospice. He met with Jenks to assess Rory's condition, offer advice for pain management and discuss at-home euthanasia. When Jenks called him on a Sunday and asked, "Would you please help me let Rory go today?" he didn't second-guess her or ask to wait until Monday. To her relief, he said, "Sure I can. What time would you like me there?"

At a time when she felt she was questioning her ability to discern what was best for Rory, Jenks said Parkinson made her more confident in her decision. "He accorded me an extraordinary degree of respect to know what was right for my boy, and I truly appreciated that," she said. "Dan lent a lot of comfort to what was really a painful, challenging time, and I am eternally grateful."

Word-of-mouth about Parkinson's compassionate service has spread quickly since he opened TenderHeart Pet Hospice in May 2015. "Dr. Dan," as he's known, has practiced veterinary medicine in Durango since 1982. He founded Riverview Animal Hospital before leaving clinical practice in 2008 to consult with national companies about improving small animal pain-management protocols. In 2013, he retired – but was called out of retirement last year to found TenderHeart.

"People would stop me in City Market and thank me for house calls that I made years ago," he said. "This idea just kept bubbling up, and I finally had to say, 'OK, I'm going to do it.'"

Now, with his wife, Laurie, offering administrative support, Dr. Dan offers at-home hospice and euthanasia, aftercare such as arranging for cremation, and grief support. He works closely with the family's veterinarian and stresses that he hopes to augment their services, not compete with them. He simply has more time to spend with clients because of his focus on end-of-life care.

"Durango's full of good veterinarians. It's one of those towns that attracts good, quality people," he said. "A lot of veterinarians in the area do a great job with end-of-life care. They've been helping their patients for years. So this service is in addition to and complementary of their good efforts."

Though Dr. Dan is an expert in pain management and the medical side of euthanasia – “I use a powerful sedative combination that I give with a very small needle” – he is particularly concerned with the emotional aspect for clients. He seeks to dispel hurtful myths like, “You can just get another pet” or “Don’t cry” and listens intently to pet owners because he feels everyone is an expert in their own grief. He’s had many clients say the pain of losing their pet was worse than the death of a relative.

“Losing a pet can be one of the real heartbreaks in a person’s life,” he said. “I think it speaks to the purity of the relationship that these little dogs and cats give us unconditional love. They’re the best listeners. They never judge us, even on our worst day.”

One way he tries to help clients “integrate” the loss of a pet is by encouraging them to appreciate how animals remind us to live in the present.

“We get in our rut, and we grind past a lot of life. I really think dogs and cats help us break that, even if it’s just for a moment or two every day,” he said. “On walks, dogs are saying, ‘Feel the ground under your feet. Breathe the air. Sniff the flowers ... get out of your head and just enjoy.’”

Though it can be taxing to perform euthanasia, Dr. Dan noted the word literally means “good death,” and said he is “energized” by being in the presence of people who care deeply about their pets. For instance, he was honored to be part of an end-of-life ceremony attended by about a dozen people for a beloved dog named Lucky. In another case, he was moved when a dog was finally physically comfortable enough to curl up beside his owner as he drifted into “a gentle, deep sleep.”

“I think it’s the last nice thing that pets do for us. Even though it breaks our heart, there is an opportunity created to see that in this loss, it’s not all bad. We can be grateful for what we had with them and know that our lives have been touched. And in some way, maybe we’re just a little bit better – a little bit kinder, a little bit gentler.”

Dr. Dan helped Tammy Hoier and her husband, Mike Todt, last year with the passing of two pets: their 20-year-old cat, Blanco, whose kidneys were failing, and Striker, their 14-year-old border collie mix who had worked as a therapy dog at Hoier’s psychology practice. The couple has always enjoyed close relationships with their pets.

“These are the closest I have to children, so the loss of them is really painful,” Hoier said. “Dan let us pace the goodbye at our own pace. He wasn’t businesslike – he was warm and respectful.”

He also helped with aftercare. They buried Blanco in the back yard (Dr. Dan will assist with home burials where legal), but due to Striker’s size, they opted for cremation. So Dr. Dan helped them carry Striker’s body to his car on a little pet stretcher and arranged for cremation through Riverview Animal Hospital. (Hoier emphasized that the staff at Riverview was also incredibly supportive throughout the ordeal. Dr. Randy Hays and his children even found a heart-shaped rock and gave it to Hoier and Todt in honor of Striker.)

Hoier said she is grateful to Dr. Dan for all of his help. “He’s just a lovely guy. For this very delicate moment in people’s lives, he’s just a great guide.”

For more information about TenderHeart Pet Hospice, call 970-403-8877, or visit www.tenderheartpethospice.com.