

# Good Grief

## *Pet loss support groups and pet writers are important to the grieving process*

By Jen Reeder

California resident Steve Epstein had an extremely difficult week in March 1998 when his mixed breed dog Sasha died of cancer at 13.

"I'd had her since she was a puppy. It was a devastating loss. I had never experienced loss like that. And coincidentally, I lost my father in the same week," Epstein said.

His veterinarian suggested Epstein visit a pet loss support group and gave him a phone number. The counselor he called didn't have an active pet bereavement group at the time, but when she heard he'd lost both his dog and his father, she offered him one-on-one counseling at the group rate. Epstein said it was helpful in dealing with his grief over Sasha's loss, which was even deeper than the loss of his father.

"I wasn't aware of how deep it could go," he said.

Athena Diesch, MSW, LGSW, a veterinary social worker at the University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center in St. Paul, MN, runs two monthly pet loss support groups and said she hears from grieving pet owners "all the time" that the loss of their dog was worse than the death of a human family member.

"It comes with a level of shame," she said. "I look at them and say, 'Don't be ashamed.'"

She said the loss of a pet is intense because they share our "intimate moments" like getting into the shower, changing clothes or using the toilet – and never judge.

"I don't know about anybody else but I've never shared my pillow with my grandma," she said. "(Pets) share our beds, we share our intimate moments with them, but when we lose them, we're expected to just move on. 'It's just a dog, it's just a cat, you can get another one, you can replace them.' Whereas if it was a human, they would say you get three to six months – at least, if not closer to a year – to actively grieve."



*Jen Reeder's yellow Lab mix, Rio, inspires her to write about dogs and try to raise public perception of their importance to humans.*

She said people who lose their dogs often don't have a safe place to talk about their loss because the response from coworkers and even friends and family can be unpredictable. By providing a safe forum in which to discuss grief, pet loss support groups can play an important role in the healing process.

Diesch said the bimonthly support groups are free and open to 4-10 pre-registered participants, who are asked to bring a photo to help the group "put a face to it." Attendees may have experienced the death of their pet, or be working through "anticipatory grief" for a pet that is terminally ill, has aggressive behavior that threatens their life, or may need euthanasia.

She doesn't have an agenda for the pet loss support groups, preferring to let participants do most of the talking while she

weaves a few common themes through the conversation. She said she is inspired watching the attendees come together to support one another.

"You watch this group bond in a way that's unreal to describe, and help each other through one of the most gut-wrenching experiences," she said. "Animals are no longer animals – animals are family members."

Wallace Sife, PhD, wrote "The Loss of a Pet" after his beloved miniature dachshund Edel Meister died in 1987 and he couldn't find helpful resources to cope with the grief; he said he was dysfunctional despite having two PhDs in psychology. The success of the book led to him founding the nonprofit Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB) in 1997. The group offers training for pet loss counselors, a list of veterinarians that perform at-home euthanasia, information about coping with topics like talking to children about euthanasia, and online pet loss support groups. The APLB holds five weekly chatrooms at [www.aplb.org](http://www.aplb.org). Over 45,000 pet owners have visited the chatrooms in the past 15 years.

He said he sees a great need for more veterinarians to offer pet loss support groups to clients.

"That's why our chatrooms are so important – there are not enough counselors being listed," Sife said. "We're trying to do everything we can."

Ann Beyke, M.A., LPC, has a private practice as a pet loss counselor in Albuquerque, NM. She trained with the APLB and then worked as a counselor in the online chatrooms. Like Dr. Sife, she devoted her career to pet loss therapy after the death of a beloved pet. She had worked in animal rescue and as a counselor to survivors of domestic violence and people with disabilities when Goldie, her 6-year-old Golden Retriever, was dying in 2006.

"It was that moment when I looked at her and said, 'I know you're dying, and I can't bear the thought of it. I know there are other people that are grieving and I want to be there for them,'" she said.

Shortly afterward she lost her mixed-breed dog Nimbus to liver cancer, which reinforced her dedication to her new vocation. She now offers three pet loss support groups each month as well as one-on-one counseling over the phone or in-person, either at her clients' homes or at hers. She said people who have just lost a dog often find solace just hugging and petting her yellow Lab mix, Raj.

"They put their face in his fur and cry," she said.



*Ann Beyke's dog Raj is a source of comfort to clients who have just suffered the loss of a dog.*

She said a common discussion topic is how hard it can be to spend time at home after the loss of a pet, regardless of whether they were euthanized at home, because of memories, such as the spot where their dog used to sleep.

"I had a client say once, 'I can't even be in my own home,'" she said. "I'm really quite honored to be able to share those losses with people because I understand it. I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't understand it."

In addition to her own counseling and materials, Beyke often recommends clients read Dr. Sife's *The Loss of a Pet* and *When Your Pet Dies* by Alan Wolfelt, PhD. She echoed the view that many people in society don't understand grief over the loss of a dog – people who may not even like dogs – which is why pet loss support groups are valuable.

"It's a disenfranchised grief," Beyke said. "If you don't have a pet,

you can't understand how hard it is to lose a pet. We know there are a lot of people out there who just aren't interested in having pets ... they aren't interested in hearing why you're sad about it."

She said pet writers play an important role in educating the general public about how important dogs can be to humans. For example, she said stories about how dogs are helping veterans cope with PTSD, or about children's literacy "read to a dog" programs, elevate public perception and potentially generate compassion for people coping with the loss of a dog.

"It's really important for people like you to keep writing about the impact that animals have on people's lives," she said.

*Freelance journalist Jen Reeder treasures every day she spends with her husband and their yellow Lab mix, Rio. Visit her online at [www.jenreeder.com](http://www.jenreeder.com).*

More information:

<http://aplb.org/index.php>

<http://www.petlosscounselor.com/>

<http://www.cvm.umn.edu/vmc/aboutvmc/clientsupport/gnl/home.html>

<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/pet-loss/>

ASPCA's Pet Loss Hotline: (877) GRIEF-10.

## TREASURER'S report

1/1/2013 to 6/1/2013

**January 1, 2013 opening balance** 30,787.38

### INCOME

Applications	975.00
Awards Banquet	5,210.00
Awards Banquet Sponsor	1,500.00
Contest Entry Fees	22.00
Dues	10,934.63
Program Advertising	55.00
Restitution	1,142.87
Special Award Sponsor	5,900.00

**TOTAL INCOME** 25,739.50

### EXPENSES

Archive Storage	300.00
Bank Charge	130.00
Banquet Expenses	9,809.47
Computer Services	1,016.76
Contest Chair Stipend	2,500.00
Contest Expenses	2,199.15
Design	1,400.00
Eukanuba booth	366.73
Gratuity (Affinia staff)	100.00
Insurance	578.00
Postage	186.01
Printing	1,176.43
Special Award Winners	8,655.00

**TOTAL EXPENSES** 28,417.55

**ENDING BALANCE** 28,109.33