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COVERING THE WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 14—SEPTEMBER 20, 2005



Photograph by George Sakkestad

Amy Shever of Los Gatos is determined that no pet should ever be left behind, so she formed two organizations to help make that dream come true. Pet Guardians helps owners create trusts to ensure their pets will be cared for if something happens to them, and 2nd Chance for Pets helps educate people and rescue orphaned pets—from the everyday cat and dog to hundreds of animals caught in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Pet Guardians are looking out for animals

Organization makes sure owners remember pets

By JENNIFERMCBRIDE

The number of victims from tragedies like Hurricane Katrina is staggering. The thing is, though, humans aren't the only victims. Hundreds of pets lost their owners as well.

So, what happens to all of those animals? Are they doomed to walk the streets, starving and alone?

Not if Amy Shever of Los Gatos has anything to say about it.

A lover of all animals

Amy Shever has always had a soft spot in her heart for animals. In the early 1990s, she helped start a rescue group in Pleasanton.

"They didn't have a rescue group up there," she explains. "So when their shelters got full, they started euthanizing animals. One of the problems was a lot of people would show up with pets of loved ones who had passed away. It was very sad; these animals are used to a lot of attention every day and living in a nice home rather than a shelter. A shelter is a very scary environment."

Shever said most of those orphaned pets never found another home.

"When people would come through looking for an adoptable pet, they liked the ones that wagged their tails and came up to them. But [the orphaned] pets are scared and they cower at the back of their cages, and then no one wants to adopt them."

She thought there must be something that could be done.

"I'm sure most of these people who passed away didn't want this to happen to their pets, but they didn't make any provisions for them," she says.

Shever took the matter into her own hands and started Pet Guardians, the first organization of its kind, in February 2004.

Pet Guardians

Some may scoff at people who leave thousands of dollars in their wills to their pets, but Shever says doing so could save their lives. Leaving money to a pet became legally possible in 1990. Shever says 32 states now have pet trust laws, including California.

She says there are three basic steps to setting up a living trust for a pet: writing out instructions for the animal's care, arranging the finances and selecting caregivers and trustees.

For the first step, the owner should write out explicit instructions on how to care for the pet—preferred foods, medicines, the type of bed it prefers and so forth. Shever says one owner left instructions that her dog should be fed only barbecued chicken in the morning and grilled ribs at night. It made sound lavish, but it's all paid for out of the trust.

For the second step, Pet Guardians creates a cost analysis to determine how much money should be set aside. Shever says Pet Guardians works with the country's top three lawyers who specialize in pet trusts. They calculate the life expectancy of the animal and how much is currently being spent on its care, and recommend an appropriate amount. Shever says this is important, because leaving too little money could be detrimental, and leaving too much could get the trust thrown out of court—family members have the right to contest a trust if they deem it unreasonable.

For the final step, Shever recommends selecting two caregivers and two trustees, so there are "backups." The trustee is the person who will distribute money out of the trust to the caregiver each month for expenses, and check in on the pet from time to time. If at any point the trustee feels the pet is not receiving proper care, a replacement can be found.

Some people opt to set aside money in their wills, but Shever says this doesn't always cover every situation—only about 20 percent of Americans have wills, and sometimes family

members have a hard time locating it when the relative dies. Also, she says, on the average, wills only get updated about every 19 years—by then, situations with the selected caregivers may have changed. Also, wills are useful only if the person dies—there are no provisions for the pet if the owner becomes incapacitated.

"Any pet owner should be thinking about this issue, it doesn't matter how old you are," Shever says. "We have a responsibility to our pets."

2nd Chance for Pets

Shever says that, after Pet Guardians debuted, she was inundated with calls.

"I decided to start the nonprofit organization, 2nd Chance for Pets, to educate people more about the issue," she explains.

Second Chance for Pets was formed in May 2004.

Earlier this year, 2nd Chance for Pets was selected by Ketchum Public Relations out of San Francisco as a pro bono client.

"They really liked our cause, and really thought we could make a difference and save a lot of pets' lives," Shever says.

With Ketchum's help, the organization bent the ear of San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, who declared this week Orphaned Pet Awareness Week for the city. 2nd Chance for Pets will also participate in Bark in the Park in San Jose on Sept. 17, a festival for dogs and their families that raises money for the Humane Society.

2nd Chance for Pets also helps rescue orphaned pets and find them new homes, saving them from euthanization. As part of this effort, the organization has teamed up with the Best Friends Animal Society in Utah and the St. Francis Animal Sanctuary in Tylertown, Miss., about 100 miles north of New Orleans. As of Sept. 7, they had taken in about 300 pets.

"They've found some of them in trees, or in homes. They're helping people by keeping their pets safe while they get relocated," she says.

As of Sept. 4, she says they didn't have nearly enough food, and had a well but no power to pump water. Therefore, 2nd Chance for Pets is working on facilities and supplies. She says people need things like nonperishable food, portable toilets, toilet paper, sunscreen and insect repellent. The pets need pet food, collars, veterinary supplies, dishes for food and water and more.

"Most people want to help but don't know how, so this is a great way", she says. "Our animals don't have voices so they can't cry out for help. We have to do it for them." Shever is working together with the Best Friends Animal Society to facilitate donations.

Shever, who lives in Los Gatos with two Labradors she helped rescue, says it can be hard work, but with help, organizations such as these can save lives, one animal at a time.

Visit www.petguardian.com, www.2ndchanceforpets.org and www.bestfriends.org. To volunteer or send donations for orphaned animals on the Gulf Coast, contact Best Friends Animal Society at 435.644.2001, ext. 398, or hurricane@bestfriends.org.