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MESA BUSINESS MAKES LOSING A BELOVED ANIMAL A LITTLE EASIER

By **MICHAEL GRADY TRIBUNE**

L.J. Cooper grew up with a cavalcade of animals passing through his house.

"My father, Leonard, was a game and fish warden," Cooper explains. "They'd find orphaned or injured animals, and he'd bring them home to take care of 'em. We had a little bit of everything: owls, javelina, golden eagles, deer ..."

But his mother, Janie, remembers one particular fawn. "It almost killed me," she recalls. "It had been rescued from a forest fire. Its lungs were singed, and it was burned on top.

"We tried to nurse it but it didn't survive," she says with a sigh. "That was a tough night."

Losing an animal is never easy. But when the animal is a longtime pet, grief can be compounded by a series of difficult questions: What do you do with the body? How do you remember the loved one? How do you say goodbye?

The answers vary widely by pet and owner. But the Cooper family — Leonard, Janie and L.J. — founded All Pets Great and Small, a Mesa-based cremation service, to help grieving pet lovers through their own tough nights.

THE DAY YOU DON'T THINK ABOUT

Austin, a 9-year-old Australian shepherd, answers the door at the Cunico home in Chandler with a mouthful of chew toy and a subdued expression. He shares the house with Cyndi Cunico, her husband, Dave, and, until recently, four other shepherds.

"We lost Augie, Austin's litter mate, two weeks ago," Cyndi Cunico says. "We're still reeling."

When Augie, an intelligent, laid-back pack leader, died suddenly at an emergency clinic, Cunico turned to All Pets for help. "It was bad enough to lose him. I didn't want to leave him there."

Pet owners prefer not to think about the day their animal dies. So when it comes, they make quick decisions on how to remember their pet and its physical remains. Most vets can keep an animal for cremation at a third-party site, with no ashes returned.

But for a growing number of owners, that's not enough. "Just having Augie's ashes was important to me," Cunico says. "I called L.J., and he came in 20 minutes to pick him up." All Pets is on 24-hour call for animals that die, in hospitals or at home. "Some people just want their (deceased) pet picked up and taken away," L.J. says. But many feel compelled to observe its passing.

"I think a lot of people are like that now," says Karen Scherer, a Chandler-based pet-sitter. "Animals have become such an important part of our lives. If you're childless or your kids have grown, your animals are your children. You have that bond."

When Ash, Scherer's pug, died, she took him to All Pets because she wanted his remains back for a memorial.

"It's not for everybody," she admits. "But it made things so much better knowing I could have him back."

Many want their animals ashes back for burial, an inhome memorial or scattering at a special place.

All Pets offers cremation in which several pets are cremated together but their ashes are kept separate for return for about \$100. Some owners opt for cremation in which the animal is cremated alone (\$150). Here, the owners will often improvise a ceremony. "They'll bring flowers," Janie says.

"Or, often times, a blanket," L.J. says.

Specifics vary widely by family, pet and tradition. "Some will say a few things from the Bible. Some just want a little time alone with their pet before the cremation," L.J. says.

Most don't want to see the crematory, but feelings differ. "Some owners want to place the pet in the machine themselves," he says. "It's important that they're the last ones to touch him. We try to customize what we do to whatever they feel is right."

A PROPER CLOSURE

A year-old family business, All Pets is a convergence of different skills. Leonard, now retired from Arizona Game and Fish Department, brings a sensitivity for animals and the environment.

Janie, a retired teacher, handles the grieving. And L.J., a veteran of the funeral industry, brings experience to the firm.

"There really wasn't any place like this in the East Valley," L.J. says. He knew there was a need after calling around to check on local resources.

"One guy actually told me to meet him in a grocery store parking lot with my pet and the money, and he'd call back in a week," he recalls. "What we're trying to do is way better."

The phone will ring as many as 15 times a week for animal pickup. "That's the hardest part of the job," L.J. says. "Picking up a pet late at night. You've got a little kid who doesn't know what happened, but you're taking away his buddy."

Respect for owners' feelings and being flexible to honor their wishes are the key elements.

"We're getting a few who preplan arrangements, when an animal takes ill," L.J. says. "But most don't want to think about it until the time comes, and we understand that." The Coopers say they're content to stay in the background, and in the phone book, until they do.

Augie still has his place in the Cunico home. His urn, flanked by a portrait and draped with his collar and tags, fills a small shelf in the family recreation room. "I know this is for us," Cunico says. "But it helps to know that (his ashes) are close by, and that Augie was treated with dignity."

Scherer has different plans. Ash's ashes reside in a decorative container that will dwell discreetly in her home, as with all her previous pets. "And when I go, I'm taking them with me," she says.

An urn is not an animal, and neither woman believes that ashes mitigate their loss. "I've lost a number of pets. It never gets easier," Scherer says.

But it does bring some closure to a difficult time. "When you get 'em back. It's like it's OK," she says. "They're home again."

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FITTING TRIBUTE: Cyndi Cunico of Chandler, with her husband, Dave, LEIGH SHELLE ROBERTUS, TRIBUNE



and the urn for their departed Australian shepherd, Augie. "We keep Augie's memorial on a shelf in the family room," she says. "So, in a way, he's still close to us."



ON CALL: L.J. Cooper, left, his mother, Janie, and father, Leonard, opened All Pets Great and Small Cremation Service in 2005. "What surprised me about this business is how rewarding it is," Janie says. "People are grateful when you help them out." All Pets Great and Small Cremation Service 1110 S. Horne, Suite 103 Mesa (480) 668-8500| www.allpets.biz MORE ON PAGE D4 A Mesa veterinarian discusses how to prepare for the loss of a pet. ASHLEY LOWERY, FOR THE TRIBUNE



IN GOOD HANDS: "When you lose your best friend, you want to know where (his remains) are going," says Karen Scherer, whose pug, Ash, was cremated at All Pets. "You can go to the facility, tour it, and know your animals are getting the dignity and respect they deserve." JENNIFER GRIMES, TRIBUNE