

suburban life

THE LAURELS PET CENTER

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Laurel Hill provides local families with customized options for grieving and honoring their dearly departed pets. page 14

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SAYING GOODBYE TO A LOVED ONE IS AMONG THE DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES OF SOMEONE'S LIFE. For many, grieving the loss of a pet—a dog, a cat, even an alligator—can be just as painful as losing a human family member.

“Pets are family, too,” says Deborah Cassidy, director of sales, marketing, and family services for Laurel Hill, an historic 265-acre memorial park spread across two campuses, whose legacy dates back to the 1830s. “People who had a relationship with us were asking if we could make accommodations for their pets, and

we didn’t want to turn them away. We also knew we could serve people’s pets in as dignified a way as we would any human being.”

The Laurels Pet Center and Pet Cemetery is located on the grounds of Laurel Hill West in Bala Cynwyd, a sister to Laurel Hill East in Philadelphia’s East Falls neighborhood. Since opening its doors approximately five years ago, the center has performed services for deceased pets of almost every sort—dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, hamsters, birds, lizards, and, yes, an alligator named Sheldon.

Families can memorialize their pets in multiple ways, including visitation services in The Laurels Pet Center. Much like traditional cemetery plots, a pet can also be interred in a plot situated on the serene grounds, complete with a custom grave marker. One particularly memorable service involved a dog named Maximus, the first animal to be buried in the cemetery.

“Maximus’s family is Jewish, so they arranged to have a rabbi come out and preside over the service,” Cassidy recalls. “We want families to be as involved as they want. To a lot of people, all they have is their pet. You can hear the devastation in their voice when they call us after their pet has died. We see it as an honor to help them grieve.”

Families who wish to forgo burial can opt for alkaline hydrolysis, also known as aquamation. Aquamation is a water-based alternative to traditional flame-based cremation, and also considered friendlier to the environment. The remains can be placed in a hand-crafted urn fashioned from sustainable wood and then presented to the family to honor at home.

Whether someone is pre-need, meaning before a pet's death, or at-need, meaning the pet has recently passed, customized services can be arranged through family service representatives such as Ginny Heyer. Heyer, who has worked at Laurel Hill for 15 years, sees her work as "a calling."

"We are very proud to say that our pet center has a non-funereal feel, in that nobody is dressed in black or has slicked-back hair like something from a funeral home in the 1980s," she says. "That doesn't mean we're not professional, but we want families to feel comfortable. As soon as they walk in the front door, you can see their shoulders drop, and they feel welcomed."

Heyer has had pets all her life, so she knows exactly how it feels to lose one. She's also a self-described "empath," so she has a gift for connecting with families through their pain. She tends to maintain connections with families long after their pets' memorial services have concluded.



Laurel Hill's staff, including Ginny Heyer (left) and Deborah Cassidy, arranges customized services for each family's pet.

As an example, she tells the story of a family whose dog she helped bury more than three years ago.

"When another one of the dogs they adopted died suddenly, they called me—not Laurel Hill West, but Ginny," she says. "We talked and grieved over the phone, and I told them I had just gotten over the flu. When I got home, the owners of the dog were at my house with a bag of vitamins and some chicken noodle soup. After they left, I locked the door and said to myself, 'Boy, I really do make a difference in people's lives.'

"That's why I stay in touch [with families] by phone and email," she continues. "People often stop in and see us after they come here to visit their loved ones. In some ways, we are their last link to what they have gone through. We were there for them at the worst time in their life. It's almost like

coming here and talking to us helps them remember their pet, or human. We really care, and they feel that we really care."

Pre-need and at-need families are about evenly split, according to Heyer. Based on her experience from working in the death industry for the past 15 years, families tend to fare better emotionally when they plan ahead.

"Just like with the death of a human loved one, it's easier to pre-plan, so when the event occurs, all you have to do is make a phone call," she adds. "Those who wait until the event occurs are in a state of extreme emotion, and are forced into financial decisions they would probably never make under different circumstances. Calling us at pre-need also allows you to go on a payment plan, if needed."

While The Laurels Pet Center and Pet Cemetery has received intense interest since its inception, the pet-memorialization industry remains in its infancy. Heyer and Cassidy understand that families may have questions. They welcome visitors to come in and tour the facilities, inquire about options, and wander the picturesque grounds.

"We never want to turn anyone away," Cassidy adds. "Even if it's something we cannot help with directly, we will always find the right service for you. We like to say you need to make one call and we'll handle everything. If someone wants to have euthanasia performed [for a pet], we can arrange that at our center, too.

"We had one individual call and ask if we could make a hairdressing appointment for her," she continues. "It was a strange request, but we did it. The people who call us are going through one of the toughest times of their lives, and we're here to help them in any way we can." ■



Families can memorialize their pets in multiple ways, including custom grave markers, hand-crafted urns, and visitation services in The Laurels Pet Center.



→ The Laurels Pet Center and Cemetery

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