

Hospice eases end of life for cats

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Purdy and Rocky -in cat heaven now - inspired the cat hospice concept.

Pets are living longer, just like people. But for pet families, this means facing sometimes difficult end-of-life decisions when pets get old, develop a serious illness or just need help getting around.

In 2011, Troy resident Maryann Clark faced such a decision when her 17-year-old brown tabby cat Rocky was diagnosed with heart disease, and in 2009 when her 16-year-old calico Purdy developed kidney failure and heart disease.

For many pet owners with seriously ill or aging pets, euthanasia has been the only choice. Clark instead wanted her felines to live as long as possible assuming that they were still active and could enjoy good quality of life. Clark got her wish at The Cat Practice veterinary hospital at 875 S. Worth in Birmingham where her cats were among the first patients to receive hospice and end-of-life care.

Rocky and Purdy, whose hospice care was chronicled for friends and family on Facebook, have since gone on to kitty heaven.

And now, The Cat Practice wants to give more pet owners the same choice by opening what is believed to be Michigan's first pet hospice.

“Helping your feline friend through a final illness is definitely worth the effort,” Clark said. “Especially when they know that the treatments you provide are making them feel better.”

The Cat Practice hospice will offer end-of-life care, modeled after human hospice that alleviates physical discomfort and provides a caring end-of-life experience for the pet and the pet's family. Like human hospice, The Cat Practice hospice is for families whose pets face an incurable condition, but can still enjoy quality of life.

Instead of curative treatment, pets receive palliative, or comfort care, that includes medication for pain and discomfort, physical affection, favorite foods and extra time with family members.

Pets in the hospice program receive care at home under the direction of The Cat Practice veterinary hospice nurse Laura Kramek. Families are taught how to administer care and have a regular pipeline in to Kramek for guidance and support. They also get reduced pricing on office visits and pet pain medications.

Psychologist Camille Greenwald, who works with The Cat Practice, is available for grief counseling. Future plans include a memory wall on the hospital's website for remembering deceased pets.

“Cats are living 20 years and more,” said Kramek. “Conditions once considered untreatable - kidney failure, heart disease, diabetes, thyroid disease - can all be managed today. As more pets are viewed as family members, their families are looking for options to euthanasia while their pet still enjoys good quality of life.

To help pet owners prepare for caring for an aging pet, The Cat Practice will hold a four-part workshop series, Caring for Aging Kitties, starting May 16. Kramek will speak on Caring for Geriatric Cats (May 16), Making End-of-Life Decisions (May 30) and Pet Hospice Care (June 13), and Greenwald on Pet Loss and Grieving (June 27). Donation is \$10 per workshop or \$25 for the series with proceeds going to The Cat Practice's Rufus Memorial Feline Fund for cats in need. To register, go to www.thecatpracticepc.com or call (248) 540-3390.

The Cat Practice cares exclusively for feline patients, but any pet owner is welcome and will benefit from the workshops.

“Emotionally speaking, losing a pet is not very different than losing anyone else we love,” said Greenwald. “Therefore, having some understanding of the normal grieving process and commonly associated feelings can help people navigate their way through what is a painful but very natural and normal life process.”

While The Cat Practice just recently formalized its hospice program, the hospital has been providing clients and their felines with options for end-of-life care for a number of years. In fact, it was clients asking for alternatives that led to the program.

“Pets touch people's lives and hearts in so many ways,” said Kramek. “Today, saying good bye can be a time to continue this bond. As long as a pet is comfortable and still enjoys quality of life, pet families have choices and that is what we want to give them.”

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