

Aging Happens: Making plans for your pet

By Ellen Waldman

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Louise and Pierre lived together for about 10 years. They were both getting up in age, but still in very good shape and healthy. Louise was the one who always did all the planning, and she thought it was time to come up with a plan for Pierre, should she pass on first. She did not go to her usual attorney who helps with estate planning. She asked around on her own to find the right solution for her needs. In this case, who would care for Pierre, her 10-year-old standard poodle? The answer was not that easy to come by.

Many people do a thorough job of preparing their estates for when they are no longer here. It's often the case that there are NO people in your life who could take care of your pet, should you predecease them. But sometimes pet care decisions are left to people who may not really know what to do.

When it comes to planning for pets, here's what I found out about our local resources. The Southern Oregon Humane Society (SoHumane.org; 541-779-3215) is able to take in pets after their person passes on. They have a form that needs to be completed ahead of time called, "disposition of my animals." It allows you to place your pet with them, and you also name the vet you wish them to use for pet care. They will try to adopt the pet out, and will only euthanize the pet if the pet is suffering beyond any hope of getting well again. They also have a "pet release agreement," which surrenders ownership of your pet to the Humane Society. All pets must be neutered or spayed before being released to new families. Kenn Altine, executive director, is very available to discuss this topic with you.

The Jackson County Animal Shelter in Phoenix (jacksoncountyor.org/hhs/Animal-Services; 541-774-6654) does not have a policy which includes planning ahead for your pet. However, they do get quite a number of "surrenders" of pets by family or caregivers, when a pet owner passes on and no other arrangements have been made.

Louise thought she might look into "poodle rescue" as an answer. I asked Eliza Kauder, who has been involved for years as a volunteer with Friends of the Animal Shelter (FOTAS: fotas.org; 541.944.2021), for her advice regarding a poodle rescue group, in this case. She replied: "Breed-specific rescue organizations are usually "rescue and adopt out" — not a keep-forever group — or they'd end up with hundreds of dogs! Her best bet is to make an arrangement with a private (younger) individual she trusts and leave money to him/her, in case she predeceases the dog. She could give X-dollars per year that the dog lives through a trust (plus reimbursement for medical expenses), and maybe a "bonus" after the dog passes away as a thank you (plus cover the cost of burying the dog). I'm glad she's thinking about this — most people don't."

When creating your list of important documents and other information in your estate, include the following about your pet or pets: name; type/species/coloring; birth date; ownership/adoption date; veterinarian; breeder; groomer. Also, provide instructions for food, water, care, exercise or other special needs that only you know about your pet.

I returned to Louise with all these suggestions and recommendations. I provided her with the documents that the Humane Society has available. I actually did locate a couple of people here locally who might be able to help with a poodle rescue, if she wanted to pursue this option. She added the information to her estate planning, detailing instructions about her pet. She did not know anyone who would just want to take Pierre as their own. But she was not ready to commit to a plan, and wanted to think this over and make a decision later. Her belief was that Pierre would never be happy with anyone else, so none of these options really appealed to her. She even wondered if euthanasia for her pet might not be a better answer, if she passed on first.

The outcome is that Louise is not ready to make this decision, and she hopes she won't have to. But at least she knows what's out there, if she does decide it's time to plan. If you are a pet owner, at least consider what you would want for your best animal friend. No one can do this part as well as you can, and it's not too soon to plan for this.