

# Hospice event in Naples gives people whose pets died a chance to grieve

• By CATHERINE HOWDEN

November 14, 2009, NAPLES — Pet owners who lost their animals celebrated the lives of their animals and talked about the pain of grieving during the Avow Hospice Rainbow Day on Saturday.

The ceremony included inspirational readings, but the part that brings people back to this event is the understanding they receive from other animal lovers.

“Most everyone here are animal lovers,” said Roger Parenteau, who has been to Rainbow Day four times. “Here you can talk and cry and everyone understands.”

Parenteau’s two dogs and one cat all passed away in the same year and he shared that experience with other attendees.

“Pets are very important in everybody’s life and they bring such joy and when they go -- boy, it hurts,” Parenteau said.

It’s been several years since Parenteau’s animals passed away and he now has Mercedes, a 3 1/2-year-old Shitzu who is a therapy dog for Avow Hospice. Despite the time that has passed, he still tears up talking about his animals.

Ellen Schmidt’s Lhasa Apso, Mandi, passed away 15 years ago and she’s been to Rainbow Day eight times.

“She was my first pet and I still think of her and I still shed tears,” Schmidt said. “This (Rainbow Day) helps and it’s a forum where you can share with people who all experienced the love of a pet and the loss of having to let them go.”

Several of the people who have attended Rainbow Day numerous times used the ceremony to reach out to attendees who are grieving the recent loss of their pet.

Michelle and Craig Stevens lost Sadie, their 13-year-old Collie, three weeks ago and still are trying to come to terms with the loss.

“It’s like we lost our daughter,” said Michelle Stevens, as she told Sadie’s story.

Schmidt and several other attendees assured Stevens that the guilt and pain they were feeling is something many people go through.

“This helps open the door for them to hear that it’s not their fault and perhaps they can start the healing process,” Schmidt said.

The organizers of the ceremony hope that bringing people like the Stevens family together with people like Schmidt will help them in handling the death of their pet.

“It interrupts the cycle of isolation and helps you reconnect with people who are walking the same walk,” Avow Hospice Chaplain Lily Kerr said.

People like Schmidt keep coming back even after they get over the initial loss to try to help others, according to Mary Brodeur, director of Community Relations for Avow Hospice.

“She’s an animal lover, a people lover, she likes to hear their stories and she thinks she can help them heal with her stories -- and she can,” Brodeur said.

Avow Hospice hosts Rainbow Day twice a year and also has a monthly support group that meets the third Monday of every month at 3:30 p.m. at Avow Hospice.

For more information or for immediate support for pet loss, call (239) 261-4404.