



NH PETS: CARE, COMMUNITY AND COMPANIONSHIP

For pet owners, a growing industry of paws-on service

By Kathleen D. Bailey
Special to the Union Leader

Several businesses in New Hampshire are betting that “pet parents” will pay for convenience, expertise and peace of mind, whether it’s a wedding or a shuttle to day care.

Tafadzwa Musekiwa had just started his wedding pet escort service when he received an unusual request from a client. “They wanted their dog in a wedding dress,” he recalled. “In the photo, it looked easy. But when we got there, the wedding dress was too small.” He remembers wrestling the pet into the gown, all shot on YouTube. He learned a valuable lesson that he’s applied to the rest of his career: “If there’s any type of clothing involved, put it on a couple of hours prior to the ceremony.”

Musekiwa’s company, Booked & Busy Pups, joins a growing number of companies that service Granite State companion animals in enjoying as full a life as possible, whether it’s a trip to the groomer or as a member of the wedding party.

Your pet of honor

Musekiwa didn’t start out to run a pet wedding care service



PROVIDED BY KELLY DILLON PHOTOGRAPHY

This pampered cat and her human enjoy a quiet moment together at one of the pet-friendly weddings facilitated by innkeepers Colm and Katy Brophy.

when he formed his Salem-based business. “We tried so many things,” he recalled. “We started off as a transportation company, we did waste management, we had a dog walking service. Then a client reached

out to us last March and asked if we could bring their dog to their wedding.” The client didn’t get back to them, and in the meantime Musekiwa decided he liked the concept, put out feelers, and ended up

escorting pets to “a bunch of weddings. Then the original client reached out.”

He now has five staff members, including himself, and

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Bringing comfort to our pets’ final moments

By Kathleen D. Bailey
Special to the Union Leader

Dr. Sharon Sernik remembers one dog’s passing she facilitated. “The dog’s name was Maggie, and her family toasted her with Irish whiskey,” she recalled. “There was another one, a cat named ‘Moonshadow,’ and her family played Cat Stevens’ ‘Moonshadow’ on a loop during the procedure.”

Sernik and Dr. Brianna Dichter belong to a growing circle of veterinarians who will help your pet cross the Rainbow Bridge in the comfort of their home. According to the two vets, the service makes the process easier and more personal for both pets and their people.

A growing need

Seacoast-based Dichter has been a vet for 11 years and began focusing on in-home euthanasia about four years ago. She has always been drawn to older pets, she explained. “Old pets have beautiful souls.”

She began observing how pets, already in pain, reacted to being brought to the clinic for their final moments. “They were often terrified in those last moments,” she said. They were afraid of the crate, of being in the car, of the loud conversations in the vet’s office or all of the above.

“Putting a pet down takes a piece of your soul,” Dichter observed. “We need to let them pass in peace, with dignity.”

She started taking clients while still employed by another vet and eventually left to start her own home euthanasia business.

Sernik has been a veterinarian for 32 years. When she started out, pet euthanasia was mostly done in-office, except for large animals such as horses. But, she said, it was “never not OK” to do it at home. Most pet owners were not aware of the service. She’d always done it for her own pets, especially in Orlando, where her office was only a few blocks from her home. When she sold her practice in Florida and moved to New Hampshire in 2012, she did a few home euthanasias on request of clients. The requests increased as word spread, and she now specializes in pet home euthanasia.

Based in the Merrimack area, Sernik euthanizes three or four pets a day, spending one hour in each home and accounting for travel time. She works two to six days a week, but not on the Jewish Sabbath. “If someone wants me on a Saturday, I have a list of other

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Furry friends bring joy to NHSPCA’s Alzheimer’s Cafe

By Will Martino
Union Leader Staff

On the second Thursday of each month, the New Hampshire SPCA opens its doors to memory care patients, their caregivers and a rotating cast of animal companions.

“There are so many smiles,” said Jill Sloan, volunteer coordinator at the NHSPCA. “The people who have been coming regularly — you see them walk through the door and they’re already smiling.”

The Alzheimer’s Cafe offers a community setting where people living with Alzheimer’s disease, dementia or other memory issues, along with their caregivers, can gather, socialize and enjoy conversation.

The NHSPCA’s location adds something extra to the format: Guests get to meet resident animals and the adopted pets of volunteers.

The program began in 2019, when it drew just five or six guests a month. But over the past two years, attendance has

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PROVIDED BY NHSPCA

The event is designed to give people with Alzheimer’s or memory-related issues a safe and judgment-free space to get out of the house.

How Franconia Notch was saved, one dollar — and one tree — at a time

On July 21, The Society for the Protection of NH Forests and The Appalachian Mountain Club celebrated two milestone anniversaries: 150 years since the founding of the AMC and 125 years since the founding of The Forest Society.

Along with North Country friends and longtime agency partners, including the NH Division of Parks and Recreation and the White Mountain National Forest, the special event was held at the base-station of the Cannon Mountain Aerial Tram in Franconia Notch — the exact former location of the historic Profile House.

Profile House

In 1852, Richard Taft and his company, the Flume and Franconia Hotel



Company, bought the former Lafayette House at the north end of Franconia Notch. Construction began on the first “Profile House,” and it opened in 1853. This first iteration of The Profile House was renovated in 1868 and completely rebuilt in 1906. It lasted 17 more years serving hundreds of wealthy guests in opulent fashion.

According to The Upper Pemigewasset Historical Society, The Profile



COURTESY OF THE UPPER PEMIGEWASSET HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Profile House is shown in this historic colorized postcard.

House was a self-sufficient community that operated a large farm with a herd of dairy cows and a greenhouse. There was a power plant, a boathouse

with a steam launch on Echo Lake, dormitories for workers, a bowling alley, a post office and telegraph office, barbershop, billiard hall, music room, souve-

nir shops, a golf course and even a fish hatchery for raising trout to stock the small trout pond. The hotel owned thousands of acres in Franconia Notch,

including the Old Man of the Mountain, The Basin, The Pool and The Flume. A mineral spring house provided water for guests.

Rustic recreation pursuits included hiking, tennis, badminton, croquet, fishing, boating and horseback riding, according to the society’s website, uphsnh.org/the-profile-house. The horse stable could accommodate up to 350 horses and carriage sheds housed a wide variety of wagons and horse-drawn coaches. In 1872, hotel owners built a narrow-gauge railroad from Bethlehem to eliminate a bumpy, dusty stagecoach ride from the north. The 9.5-mile railroad had two engines named for each lake in the Notch: Profile and Echo. In 1883,

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Saying Goodbye

people I can pull up,” she said. And because of the growing need for the service, she has people to refer.

All the comforts of home

According to Dichter, the best place for your animal’s final moments varies. “It’s where they are most comfortable,” she said. “Older animals often have a favorite spot. Or if it’s a beautiful day, the family may take them outside.”

Some families light candles or incense, others play music or recite prayers, she added. “And obviously there’s an atmosphere of grief, of sadness,” she said. Dichter has euthanized animals in the clinic and in private homes, and she prefers the home. Or the yard, or the patio. “At home families are calmer, the weight is lifted off” she said. “The owners have been putting it off, and there’s a sense of relief. They don’t have to watch their pet suffer anymore.”

Owners of multiple pets have usually been through the process before, and according to Dichter, they also prefer the home service. “They are relieved at how beautiful and peaceful it is,” she observed.

Children and pets

Dichter has seen a range of pet owners, from seniors saying goodbye to their senior pets to children. “We allow anyone to be there,” she said, adding, “But we appreciate it when parents are upfront with their children.”

Children younger than 5 generally don’t understand what’s going on and often wander off to play. Children ages 5 to 12 can grasp the concept, she said. Parents can explain it like this: The vet is “going to give Fluffy some medicine that will put her into a deep sleep.” The second injection will stop Fluffy’s pain and

suffering, she said.

With the final injection, Dichter warns that children need to know “this is only something we do for dogs and cats.” They need to know that their beloved older relatives will not end their lives the same way, she said.

According to Sernik, the animals she puts down are almost all elderly. If she receives a request for a younger pet, it’s usually because of aggression issues. “The animal is not safe to rehome,” she said. Her clients aren’t always older people, she added. “Sometimes they’re 17 or 18 and the pet grew up with them. Sometimes people adopt senior pets, but they’re not necessarily seniors themselves.”

The process

Sernik’s services begin with an extensive phone consultation. “I ask, ‘Why are we doing this?’ If your 15-year-old cat is too skinny, have you talked to the vet? If your old dog needs pain medication, can you afford it? I have to make decisions whether the service will actually be a kindness to the pet.”

If she and the family agree that the time has come, she goes to the home by appointment. She has treats for the animals and also kits for mementos — a paw print card, a clipping of fur.

When the family’s ready, she gives the pet its first injection, the sedative. Then, “We sit around and talk. How did your dog get its name? Did it like hiking?” She writes down the answers and uses them later in a customized sympathy card. “They need to remember the bouncy 2-year-old they took on hikes, not just this old sick animal,” she explained. “They need to remember the good times.”

The second shot goes quickly, and she steps away

so the family can say goodbye to their pet.

If they’re planning to bury the animal themselves, she leaves. If they want her to take care of it, she will wrap it in a pillowcase, “always with the face showing,” or in a clean sheet and on a stretcher if it’s a larger pet. “They have the pet’s face showing,” she said, and as she loads the dead animal into her car, they have one final glimpse.

Coming to terms

Dichter grew up in a family with many pets. “Too many, honestly,” she said in retrospect. “My family was big animal lovers.” The family’s affection for animals inspired her choice of career. But she also had to see some of her early pets put down, and she said, “When you’re young it’s a traumatic experience. It can shape your childhood.” It’s hard for a kid to grasp death, hard for them to grasp the concept of euthanasia.

But as we grow older, we learn “that there are worse things in life,” Dichter said. “It’s our job as pet owners to see that. It’s our job to release them.”

Sernik sees the issue from both sides, as a pet doctor and a pet owner. “My husband and I have had more than 35 pets over the course of our marriage,” she said. They’re currently dealing with the same question as her clients: When? “One of my dogs has cancer, and we’re wrestling with it,” she said. “We did chemo, but it’s in her lungs now.”

On her website she features a questionnaire, “Is It Time?” For some people, that’s their “aha” moment, according to Sernik.

Sernik often compares the service she offers to hospice care. “The family members can pass peacefully at home,” she said. “We want that for our pets as well.”



Tafadzwa Musekiwa walks a dog as part of his professional wedding day pet service.

Business

from eight weddings last year, the company has now booked between 15 and 20 for its second wedding season.

Every event is different, according to Musekiwa. Sometimes the happy couple wants their animal available for photos, either before or after the ceremony. Some want their pet or pets there through the actual ceremony. Some want the pet to walk down the aisle, others don’t. Only one client has asked to have the pet in the cocktail hour and reception, but Booked and Busy obliged. “That,” he said, “was a late night.”

More often, the pet’s big day ends after the photo session. Musekiwa or a staff member take the dog to a boarding facility for one night, to the couple’s home, to a relative’s place or to its own hotel room.

Why hire an outsider? Musekiwa said it’s just easier all around. “If you’re a family member at the wedding the dog may jump on you, get fur on you. They can be distracting. It’s much easier for everyone to outsource.”

Drive time

Jennifer Weatherbee has worked with animals all her life, with an associate degree in equine science, a bachelor’s degree in animal science and a career as a vet tech. She was living in Brentwood and working at the latter when she noticed a need in the Seacoast. “This is a huge pet community,” she said, “especially for dogs. And there are a lot of services, day care, groomers.” But the dogs had no way to get to those facilities, and Weatherbee’s Dogg Bus was born.

“Individual day cares provided transportation for their clients,” she said. But she knew as a consumer that people didn’t necessarily want to be

limited to one facility.

She created a name, designed a logo and applied it to her Subaru. “People saw me driving around, and I built a clientele by word of mouth. It was organic.”

The car was originally a “doggie school bus” driving them to day care, but as Weatherbee fielded more requests, she added more services. The bus now takes pets to “whatever’s needed — day care, grooming, the vet.”

Her clients are predominantly two-career families, though she also serves a number of elder pet owners who can’t get out. She’s gone as far as the Lakes Region with a pet transport but prefers to focus on the Seacoast.

In addition to her two degrees, Weatherbee said she holds a Class B commercial driver’s license and is certified in pet first aid and pet CPR.

Health is important to her, and she avoids taking a group of dogs to different day cares in one trip. “I only service one day care per trip,” she said, noting, “Each facility brings its own set of germs.”

Everyone welcome here

For innkeepers Colm and Katy Brophy, including pets at their two wedding venues wasn’t a question. They’ve owned Longlook Farm in Sanbornton for 15 years and the Winthrop Carter House in Boscawen for 12. “We love pets,” Katy Brophy said. “We have two yellow Labs of our own.”

The layout of each of their venues supported the decision to include animals, according to Brophy, making it possible for their guest pets to roam freely.

Both venues specialize in destination weddings, Brophy said. A typical couple checks in Thursday and leaves Sunday, so it made sense to include

pets. “It’s an extended stay,” she said. “We want everyone to be included.”

According to Brophy, this results in a stress-free weekend. The bridal couple doesn’t need to board their pets. Usually a family member will take pet duty, although she has also hosted pets with professional wedding pet sitters. “It’s special to have the pets there, but weddings can be chaotic and busy,” she said.

Katy Brophy said almost 100% of the Brophys’ weddings feature pets. It’s what the facilities are known for. While the majority of her pet guests are dogs, she’s also hosted cats and horses.

“One woman rode down the aisle on her horse,” she said. “They had a handler who took care of the horse the rest of the day.”

Another man, following a tradition from India, rode into his ceremony on a horse. She also remembers a “beautiful Persian cat” who wore a floral crown with ribbons for the formal photos.

“She was definitely a diva,” Brophy said with a laugh.

After the ceremony and reception, some couples take the pet back to their room, Brophy said, while others keep the sitter for the evening. “Either way, it’s a win-win for everybody,” she said.

Leaving their pets at home on their wedding day can be hard on couples, she said. “They’re an important part of our lives. What if a couple got engaged while hiking with their dog, and the dog was in all the photos?”

Musekiwa expects to see the demand for his and other pet services increase. “Dogs are so much a part of our lives now,” he said, adding, “One of mine just passed, and my mother referred to it as her first grandchild.”

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