

Pet Angel offers animal owners the chance to grieve, pay respect

by Barbara E. Cohen

When Coleen Ellis's beloved Mico died a year and a half ago, she found new options for burying or memorialize her dog. According to Indiana law, pets cannot be buried in human cemeteries, and in Hamilton and Marion counties, it is illegal to bury a pet in your backyard.

"There are many options for humans that aren't offered to owners of pets regarded as family members," says Ellis, who once worked in the human funeral services industry. "There are pet cemeteries and memorial gardens, but few places where you can host a funeral service or get ongoing grief counseling, pre-plan your pet's memorial service and burial or get advice."

Ellis discovered that embalming, taxidermy and cremation choices were also limited. Basically, you could have your pet cremated through your vet in a group cremation, as an individual cremation separated within a group cremation, or as a private cremation where pets were disposed of one at a time.

"Most people select individual cremations, but you cannot be sure you will receive all the ashes of your pet or that other ashes are not included with yours," Ellis says. "Mico was my baby, and I didn't want her ashes co-mingled. I wanted her remains treated with dignity."

Last August, Ellis opened the Pet Angel Memorial Center – the first stand-alone pet memorial center in the United States operated like a human funeral home – to fill the gap in services. As Ellis explains, her business is an alternative to "animal removal services." She treats pets as important members of the family and picks them up the same day death occurs, often within the hour, wraps them in a blanket and places them in a small casket for transport to the center.

In addition to offering a number of burial and cremation choices and the only pet-exclusive funeral chapel in the state, Ellis also hosts a pet loss support group twice a month



Coleen Ellis, owner of Pet Angel Memorial Center, offers a range of services and merchandise.

Memorial Pillows are designed to be placed in the pet's favorite spot.



and sells merchandise to memorialize a treasured pet. A few examples include artwork, \$175 and up, floral tributes, \$160, memory pillows, \$50, and personalized note cards. She even offers special jewelry urns, so you can carry a part of your pet with you, as well as a variety of charms, necklaces and cufflinks with your pet's special "handprint" – a paw or nose print.

The Stiefmaier family certainly appreciates what Pet Angel Memorial Center has to offer. When their guinea pig Punky died in October 2004, Melissa Stiefmaier came to the center for assistance. "We had our guinea pig a little less than a year, but my daughters were quite attached to her," Stiefmaier says.

Ellis counseled the Stiefmaier's through the burial and grief process. Daughter Caitlin, 13, assisted with writing the words on the plaque on Punky's casket, and daughter Bianca, 7, helped pick out the box holding Punky's remains. "I had no idea how to explain to the girls that I was doing with Punky," says Stiefmaier. "Coleen gave them an outlet to talk about what happened"

Cremation and burial packages include picking up the pet, choices of remembrance merchandise and sometimes family time and a memorial service at the center. The packages cost between \$175 and \$375 depending on the options selected.

Pet Angel Memorial Center also handles the remains of service dogs at no charge, which helped Melanie Sanford when her 5-year-old golden retriever Chloe, a seeing-eye dog, ran out into traffic and was killed. Sanford and her husband said goodbye to Chloe in the memorial chapel, and Ellis took care of the cremation and delivery of the ashes to the Sanfords. "The urn is the most beautiful knickknack I own," says Melanie Sanford.

Ellis also helped retrieve Sanford's guilt over the accident and put things into perspective. "Coleen is available to help get through the grieving and to take some of the pain away," Sanford says. "She cares about pets and their people."