



photo by Liz Kaye Photography

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ICCFA Magazine author spotlight



► Coleen Ellis co-chairs the ICCFA Pet Loss Professionals

Alliance, which will hold its fourth annual conference as part of the ICCFA's 2013 Convention & Expo, April 10-13, Tampa Convention Center & Marriott Waterside Hotel & Marina, Tampa, Florida.

► Coleen Ellis' Two Hearts Pet Loss Center, Indianapolis, Indiana, provides consulting services for organizations that want to offer death care services for pets, and information about pet grief. With her in the photo above are Crisco and Ellie Mae, who previously appeared with Ellis on the cover of ICCFA Magazine's March-April 2006 issue.

www.TwoHeartsPetLossCenter.com

► In 2004, Ellis opened the first stand-alone pet funeral home in the United States, Pet Angel Memorial Center, Carmel, Indiana. She later sold the business, which is still operating and has expanded.

► She received the first death and grief studies certification specializing in pet loss companionship from Dr. Alan Wolfelt's Center For Loss, Fort Collins, Colorado. She has also completed the educational requirements to be certified in thanatology.

► Ellis started in the human death care industry, working for Forethought, Batesville, Indiana, beginning in 1990. She has a bachelor's degree in marketing from Fort Hays State University, Kansas.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A decade ago no one had even heard of a “pet loss professional.” For the past three years, members of the Pet Loss Professionals Alliance have been working to define their roles and educate pet parents and veterinarians.

On the PLPA agenda: Education, due diligence and transparency

Coleen Ellis, who started the first stand-alone pet funeral home eight years ago, has seen the pet death-care profession grow and evolve a great deal since then. As co-chair of the Pet Loss Professional's Alliance, part of the ICCFA, she is working to shape that evolution.

ICCFA Magazine talked to Ellis about what the PLPA has been working on and where she sees the profession and the alliance going in the future.

It's been a couple of years since we talked to you about what the PLPA is doing. At that time, you mentioned that the group was working on providing continuing education.

Correct. That has morphed into offering the Certified Pet Loss Professional designation. To achieve that designation, one of the requirements is to attend a PLPA College. You also have to have at least two years in active business working with pet parents in the area of pet loss. You then have to fill out an application and have it approved.

After you achieve the CPLP designation, there are continuing education requirements every year. People can fulfill that in a variety of ways—by participating in the webinars we offer, by going to the annual convention, by attending PLPA College, by speaking at a veterinary association meeting.

You also talked about having attorney Poul Lemasters develop some disclosure forms that PLPA members could use in their businesses.

That is well under way, and we are continuing to add to our library of forms. It's been very enlightening and rewarding to work with Poul, who has put a lot of effort into and focus on what's going on in the pet industry in related areas such as

medical care, tracking what is happening in terms of litigation. He's very forward-thinking in saying, “If this other type of pet care business is being sued for this, it makes sense that we need this type of form to protect our businesses.”

And of course Poul also has the benefit of knowing what sorts of protections funeral homes, cemeteries and crematories on the human side need to have and what issues have come up, and he's doing a beautiful job of mirroring the human side of the business as he develops forms for the pet side. (Editor's note: Lemasters is ICCFA special cremation counsel.)

So we're going to have things in our library such as a sample cremation authorization form, a sample third-party agreement form, a sample form for a vet clinic or family to acknowledge receipt of cremated remains. Also, Poul talks a lot about making sure veterinary clinics and the pet loss operations they use are designated on each other's insurance policy so they're fully covered. Poul has really investigated what our profession needs.

This is going to be a work in progress; we'll add to that library of forms as new concerns pop up.

It sounds as if simply seeing what the PLPA suggests in terms of the forms you should be using is an education in running a pet-related death-care business.

Exactly. A lot of folks in our profession are not used to these forms. And when they roll these forms out to their veterinary partners, they get a lot of pushback. Poul's already getting called to speak at veterinary meetings to help educate our veterinary partners, to help them understand what he's seeing in terms of litigation.

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We're also trying to make sure we educate veterinarians about what we do because it's a simple fact that veterinarians lose upwards of 23 percent of their clients each year, solely due to how death care is handled. We want them to understand the importance of handling that final journey in a way that's good for the family and also good for the veterinary clinic.

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I think at the core of everything we do as an association in its infancy is the education of not only our members but also the other folks involved in what we do, including pet parents and veterinary partners. So we want to make sure our educational materials are spot-on and then flood the market with the information.

If you take your business directly to pet parents rather than veterinarians, should you nevertheless be talking to veterinarians about what you do, trying to educate them?

Absolutely. We want to educate veterinarians on the importance of doing due diligence when dealing with crematories and cemeteries and on the need for proper paperwork—using releases, documenting everything. In so many states, pets are legally considered property, so when we cremate somebody's pet we're burning someone's property. And in some places, you're seeing lawsuits for emotional distress, people saying their pets are like family members. So we want to make sure we have the signatures we need on the correct forms.

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So that's an argument you would make to veterinarians who see your pet death-care business as competition?

Absolutely. "If you want to see me as competition, let's talk about 23 percent of your business going away every year. You're your own competition."

You can ask 10 veterinarians, "How many of you learned about death care? How many of you learned about pet grief? How many of you learned about pet loss when you were in veterinary school?" And you will get 10 answers like this: "We had a one-hour class on it."

A pet death-care business can complement a veterinary business. It can make the veterinarian look good, because he or she cared enough to send them to the right person to help them with that death. And it can bring the family back to that caring veterinarian after deciding to adopt another pet.

Grief over a pet is a very disenfranchised grief, because if 62 percent of people have a pet, that means 38 percent don't, 38 percent may not "get it" when you're going through mourning a pet. And if you've got a veterinary clinic that minimizes the process, the grief and what families may want or need, it becomes a recipe for disaster.

In terms of continuing education, the PLPA has been offering a robust schedule of webinars—one each month.

Yes; they've really taken off. We started with a few participants, and it's continued to grow until we have good attendance pretty consistently. We've had some very lively and spirited sessions. John Remkus has provided great information on cremation procedures; Jody Clock has talked about how you market your pet loss business; Bill Remkus has talked about pet cemeteries.

We're going to start bringing in our vendor partners for the 2013 webinars. We've created some beautiful relationships with vendors who are very supportive of the pet loss profession. Those guys have a wealth of knowledge.

It sounds like you've accomplished a lot of what you were talking about doing two years ago. What are some of the new projects you'll be working on for 2013?

One of the things that's popped up on our radar is alkaline hydrolysis. We want to make sure that we're ahead of that movement with our definitions and procedures.

Something else that will be atop our 2013 agenda will be establishing a multifaceted due diligence program. It could involve a due diligence check sheet our members can use for self-checks, to produce a "report card" on their processes

and business practices that they can show to veterinary clinics. Or maybe we could check each other.

We'll also be working on a RACE-certified presentation we can give our members to use for educating their local vet clinics on what a proper pet crematory business looks like and how they can exercise due diligence to check out a business. It will encourage vets to carry out inspections. We want our members to be able to tell vets, "Here are the questions you need to ask. This is what things should look like."

(RACE stands for Registry of Approved Continuing Education. It's a program provided by the American Association of Veterinary State Boards to approve courses for CE credits for veterinarians and vet techs.)

And we want to take things to the next level and let vets and pet parents know, on our website, that these are the firms who have gone through the hoops to earn the PLPA designation. We're still working on the terminology, but we're looking to do something equivalent to the Better Business Bureau.

Also, the standards and ethics committee is working on a type of rating system that indicates the types of services a particular facility offers. Something like when you are checking out hotels, you know what amenities a five-star hotel offers, a four-star, etc.

We all know the Internet means that local problems and scandals can go nationwide. If a pet crematory was dumping animals in a landfill instead of cremating them, everyone hears about it. Does that make it easier to talk to veterinarians about doing due diligence?

I don't like to use the negative side, but I guess you could say, "We want you to have your eyes wide open. The people who were using that crematory thought everything was going fine. Here's how you protect yourself."

We encourage people not to do "visits" to their crematory. Don't call your crematory and say, "I'm coming over at 10 a.m.

PLPA convention: Mock trial, media & business advice & much more



Can you give us a preview of the PLPA program for the 2013 convention in Tampa Bay?

Oh, my gosh; our speakers are amazing.

- Poul Lemasters is going to do a pet cremation version of the mock trial he did at the 2012 convention on the human side. We're going to get "jurors" from the Tampa area to listen to a wrongful pet cremation case.

Instead of people playing a widow, a funeral director, a crematory owner and a cemetery owner, we'll have people playing a pet parent, a veterinarian and a pet crematory owner. I'm very excited about this session.

- My husband and business partner, Chris Burke, is going to be talking about how you determine a need within your market to understand what kind of business you should be to fill that need, and then how you set prices appropriately.

- Susan Miller, who is a PR specialist, is going to do a two-hour presentation on how to handle the media, how to be interviewed by the media in your market.

- Kate Moore is going to talk about pet hospice.

- Jody Clock is going to discuss some of the things you can do with pet trusts.

- Bill Remkus and I are going to be speaking on how you take your brain to the next level, how you keep looking for services you can offer in your market, how you continue to offer something different.

So we've got a robust PLPA track with some very different presentations. □

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

tomorrow." Don't do that; that's a visit. Do spot inspections. Don't call; just show up and say, "I want to see what you're doing. Lift up the retort door. I understand you're cremating one pet at a time.; I want to see what's in there."

So for a PLPA member who does have a retort and wants to handle cremations for veterinarians, a selling point is, "You can inspect my facility at any time."

That's something we want PLPA members to offer. One of the things we talk about is transparency; another is having an open-door policy. If you can't have an open door policy or you can't be transparent about what you're doing, the question is what are you hiding, what are you doing that's not appropriate?

Transparency is a huge, huge, huge thing we talk about in every meeting. Being transparent to the families; being transparent to the clinics.

That sounds like Poul Lemasters talking.

Absolutely. And he's right.

In answering questions about cremation on the human side, he'll sometimes say, "You can do that, but you have to make sure your families know you're doing it."

Exactly, and we say the same thing on the pet side. For example, if you're going to do "partition" cremation, make sure the veterinarians know about it, make sure the families know. Make sure that it's defined in your paperwork. Talk about the possibility of comingled cremated remains. And if the family says, "I understand, I'm good with it," we've done our transparency work.

Something else you mentioned two years ago was talking to PLPA members about doing creative marketing to pet parents. Has that effort started?

I wanted to make sure that we really had a good, strong foundation with our association, which is only three years old. We've implemented standards and definitions and tried to have consistency in terminology, which is one of the big things we were after and which will affect some firms' marketing. Once that foundation is solid, the sky's the limit as far as getting the word out.

Could you give me an example of what you mean by terminology affecting the marketing message?

One of the things we're watching for

on websites is the use of "private" and "individual," making sure those terms mean the same thing. Also, we're seeing some marketing pieces that don't make it clear that with a partition cremation there will be comingling of ashes; they're not being transparent about that.

We want people showing the PLPA logo to abide by the definitions we've agreed on as an association and to be upfront about it. We want to be very, very consistent in what we're all taking about. As PLPA members, we want to operate together for the betterment of the whole profession, not just of individual members, and we want to protect pet parents by being consistent in what we offer them.

It's been eight years since you opened the first stand-alone pet funeral home. The acceptability and availability of pet funeral service offerings has certainly increased since then. Has this surprised you?

No. As a matter of fact, if you go back to the first article you and I wrote, I said that in the next 10 years this whole concept is going to take off. If I leave one legacy in this industry, it will be educating people about the fact that pet parents who consider their pets family members want this experience of honoring their pet and having memorialization and product options. We just have to educate them about what their options are.

I want our profession to offer families options. I want businesses that say there's more to this than picking up a bagged pet out of a freezer from a clinic that's negotiated a price based on what's best for the clinic, not what's best for the family.

You've mentioned you, PLPA Co-Chair Bill Remkus and Poul Lemasters giving talks to groups of veterinarians to educate them about the pet loss profession.

Yes, and we'll continue to do that. It hasn't been easy convincing veterinarians to consider a change, because their philosophy is, if it ain't broke, why fix it? It's a matter of helping them see it could be made better.

In my consulting business, I talk a lot about being a partner with veterinarians. Not a supplier, a partner. Pet death is something they deal with on a daily basis, and we want them to understand that how it's handled has a big impact on the family and also on how many of those families



Ellis speaking to different groups about the PLPA and about today's pet parents.

they will retain as clients.

If the process is handled right, they get to keep a client, and we all know it's much easier and less costly to keep an existing client than to get a new one. So we want veterinary professionals to see us as business partners rather than suppliers.

Poul Lemasters and I are getting ready to talk to state veterinary association meetings in Illinois and Iowa. When there was a pet crematory scandal in New Orleans, Poul and John Remkus and I went down there and did a continuing education session for the veterinary association about how to prevent that sort of thing from happening.

PLPA members who feel comfortable speaking in front of a group could do the same in their cities. If they don't feel comfortable doing that, they can get in contact with me about doing it. I've got a presentation I do for veterinary clinics or associations called "The Changing Pieces of Pet Death Care."

It talks about how pet parents want more, explains what happens to them when their pet dies, what kind of support they're looking for and the role the veterinarian can play.

I would think the idea that some pet parents want to spend more money and have a meaningful experience would not be coming out of left field. If someone's spent thousands of dollars trying to keeping their pet alive, should it be

difficult for the veterinarian to believe that same person would want to do more than spend \$50 cremating that pet?

You're exactly right. That person might want to have a service, have a piece of memorial artwork done.

I recently read that people in this country spend \$370 million every year on Halloween costumes for their pets.

I'm not surprised. Isn't that awesome? I love it. It's the baby boomers, who are saying, "these are our new kids" now that their children are grown. And it's the young couples who are saying "We're not ready to have a child yet; we're going to test drive with a puppy." And then they're buying costumes and Christmas stockings for the puppy, because he's their kid.

Anyone who's on Facebook notices how many photos and updates people post about their dogs and cats.

One sticks in my mind—it started on Facebook and then went viral—about a man who has an old dog with arthritis. The dog, Schoep, is his best friend, and he takes him out into Lake Superior as therapy and cradles him in his arms until Schoep falls asleep. Doesn't it just leave you in a heap on the floor when you read that or see that photo?

That is powerful. That is the core of what we're about; it's the human-animal bond.

In a follow-up to the story about that

photo, Schoep's owner said the dog saved his life after a broken engagement caused him to consider suicide, so he wants to do everything he can for him.

Schoep is 17 years old, so he's in that last stage of life. And you look at everything this guy has done for him, to return his love, and when Schoep dies, someone's going to take him away, whoosh, and tell this guy to go home and take a couple of aspirin and he'll be back to normal in the morning? I don't think so; that's not how the human-animal bond works.

There are a of people in this country who don't have somebody else living with them. What they've got is that pussy cat or that doggie, and that unconditional love. And that's all they have. I was called a couple of times this year to comment for articles about people who committed suicide after the euthanization of an animal. Granted, there were other issues present, but that was the thing that pushed them over the edge, losing that unconditional love and support.

As we continue growing our membership, we'll continue to reach out to people, to offer our support. We plan to continue to be forward-thinking, to look at what we need to do to bring our members the services, tools and education they need.

And our commitment to pet parents is that we'll do what we can to make sure the loss of their pet is handled the way it should be. □