

Ask the Undertaker

By Ryan Helfenbein

During this past holiday season my family did its annual visit to see Santa. While our two boys were (very impatiently) waiting for their chance to talk to the man in red, we noticed a family that had brought their four-legged friend along to see Santa too. This family placed their dog right next to their son on Santa's lap. Watching this, I couldn't help but think that pet owners, myself included, truly do love their animals to the point that they are considered a part of the family. This is true as well when families lose their pets and have to make the difficult decision of what to do next. In the world of an undertaker, we are finding an enormous increase in the popularity of pet services, including, but not limited to, pet cremation.

Undertakers are beginning to realize that families cherish their pets and want them treated with the same measure of dignity and respect they extended to the two-legged members of the family. Pet funeral homes, pet cemeteries and now pet cremation are but a few of the many facets of pet services being offered today by more progressive funeral care providers. Interestingly, just as we are seeing with people, cremation seems to be the most requested means of disposition for our pets.

When it comes to pet cremation, typically there are two options: mass cremation and individual cremation. Mass cremation occurs when many pets are cremated at one given time and the cremains are divided out and either returned to the family or disposed of in another dignified manner. Another option is called individual cremation. This is when a pet is cremated individually and the cremated remains are returned to their owner. With this said, more research needs to be made into exactly what a firm may be calling "individual cremation."

A lot of times when pet cremation companies provide "individual cremation"

they place the pet in a large metal pan, which is then placed into a large cremation unit (called a retort). They are typically placed alongside many other pets, in their individual pans. After the cremation procedure is complete, the remains are processed individually and then returned to the family. Sounds good, but during the cremation process, there is a lot of air moving in a closed space, creating a risk of comingling of the remains, similar to that of a mass cremation. Many funeral firms have recognized this concern and have begun offering "private individual cremation." The difference is that pets are placed into the cremation unit one at a time, providing the same respectful individual treatment that reputable cremation firms require for humans. This service is possible because they have gone to the trouble of securing specialized pet cremation equipment, which is designed to cremate one pet at a time, and the care of the pet is placed in the hands of a certified crematory operator.

With "private individual cremation" we are also finding that firms are providing families with certificates of cremation. These documents certify that their pet was in fact truly privately and individually cremated. This typically includes a signature of the licensed crematory staff member and a printed ID number that is also recorded at the crematory.

In addition to the pet cremation services being provided today, undertakers are also making themselves available to transport the pet into their care from the place of passing. Wearing the standard dark suit attire, at all hours of the night, undertakers arrive at the place of passing with a specially designed stretcher and take the

beloved pet into their care. This process is performed in the same fashion that is provided for humans. In addition, undertakers even make "hospital calls" to the local veterinarian offices shortly after the passing, avoiding the cold storage veterinarians sometimes use while waiting for a cremation service to bring a beloved pet into their care. Fortunately, undertakers have now made themselves available so this no longer has to be the only option.

Over the years, undertakers are seeing more families making their final plans in advance, and many of these families are considering cremation. As we begin to discuss these plans with our families, let's not forget about Fido and Fluffy.

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