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"My girl": Silla the German shepherd loved to play in the park near Isom's home. At left, Isom cradles the box that contains Silla's ashes.



Photos by Matthew Staver for USA TODAY

Going through her pet's effects: Chiquita Isom of Colorado Springs had a funeral last year for her German shepherd, Silla, who died of a heart tumor.

Pet funerals go upscale

Many owners spare no expense to say farewell to their beloved animals

By Sharon L. Peters
Special for USA TODAY

COLORADO SPRINGS — When Chiquita Isom's German shepherd, Silla, died of a fast-growing heart tumor last year with almost no warning, Isom was inconsolable.

She knew she needed to do something to honor the loving dog she always called "my girl."

Days later, the Rev. Pat Boone, in black robe and long shawl patterned with dogs and cats, arrived at Isom's home. Near an altar with pictures of Silla, her leash and toys, Boone conducted a funeral service before more than a dozen people —

holding ceremonies that pay tribute to pets and provide the humans with an endpoint that celebrates the good times and helps them reframe their grief.

In Atlanta, pet owners pay from "\$495 for a casket, viewing, burial and headstone to \$2,000 or \$3,000" for various additional services, fancier caskets and the like, says Keith Shugart, the second generation of pet funeral tenders at Shugart's Deceased Pet Care Funeral Home.

Burial business is booming

The family, headed by a licensed funeral director, has laid animals to rest for more than 40 years and has grown to three locations with chapels, cemeteries, gazebo and other accoutrements to comfort the pet owner. There's even one area where pets and humans can be buried beside each other.

Some of the funerals Shugart has handled consist of "a man, wife and child saying goodbye to their pet," Shugart says; some draw 100 or more attendees. "People might bring a chaplain, or their own music and balloons. Some do readings. Each is unique."

"We bounce ideas back and forth with the family to make sure they get exactly what they want."

In June, Shugart's will open what's billed as the nation's largest pet funeral facility, including two chapels, a viewing area, a euthanasia room and an entrance foyer with fish pond and aviary.

Most ceremonies tend to be low-key. When Princess the poodle died last year in Jamestown, Ohio, her owner and 20 friends gathered at the pet cemetery, spoke lovingly of the dog and covered her casket with roses. The arrangements were handled by Michael Storer of Pet Dignity.

"Most people like the ceremony to be simple," he says.

Of the 80 calls Storer handled last year,

most involved simply transporting a deceased pet to a crematorium (\$165 and up) or placing it in a casket (\$299 and up), then returning the remains to the owner for burial on the property or at a cemetery (about \$100).

But about 10% involved a parting ceremony. In those cases, Storer always reads *The Rainbow Bridge*, a well-known anonymous poem that promises pet and person will be reunited in death. Sometimes pictures are displayed; often people offer tributes.

"Pets are with their people day in and day out, and the relationships are very meaningful," he says. "It can be very important to some of them to have a service."

'We do whatever helps them'

Casual funerals — usually conducted on the beach or another outdoors locale — are common on the Outer Banks, says Chris Stoessner, a licensed funeral director. He launched Outer Banks Pet Funerals and Cremations as a side business in Kill Devil Hills, N.C., in 2006.

Much of his business consists of picking up and transporting deceased pets to a crematorium two hours away, then delivering the remains in an urn to the family (\$309 to \$349). But for a fee, usually about \$100, he'll also tend to details of a ceremony, including hauling a podium to the site, setting up seating and placing the flowers.

"Even in this economy, some people want to go the extra mile to commemorate their pet, and we do whatever helps them," Stoessner says.

Emotional release can come with a proper goodbye, Boone says: "The photo I have at the end of Silla's service shows everyone smiling."



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many of whom had met Silla and Isom at the park they frequented. Boone quoted Scripture, read poems and spoke of the unconditional love pets provide and the importance of saying goodbye.

"It helped me with closure and with the support I needed to get through the loss," says Isom, a nurse practitioner.

Devoted pet owners are increasingly