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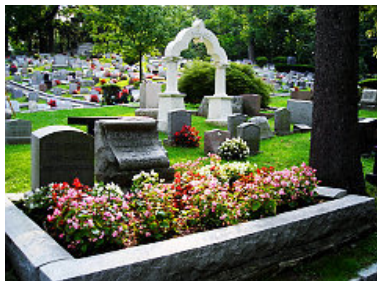
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Owners love their pets in life and death

BY AMYSACKS
DAILY NEWS WRITER

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For AnnMarie Hegarty, the trio of urns on display in her living room wall unit is more than just attractive décor. After all, the three simple wood vessels contain the ashes of her beloved dogs, Maggie, King and Taj, a 12-year-old chow mix, who died from cancer this year.



The Hartsdale Pet Cemetery will host a blessing of the animals ceremony tomorrow to honor lost pets.

While some family members consider the practice a bit odd, and even creepy, Hegarty says her dogs belong there, because they were part of the family.

"Seeing the urns are just a reminder of how much they were loved, and how much love and joy they brought," said Hegarty, a stay-at-home mom, with two kids ages 3 and 8, from Howard Beach, Queens.

In fact, her husband has been instructed that the dog's ashes are always to remain with her.

"When I die, I want their ashes to be laid to rest with me, beside me like they have never left me, because, in my heart they never have," she said.

When it comes to honoring her dogs, Hegarty maybe be over the top, but she is hardly alone. Today, an increasing number of families are memorializing their companion animals as they would any other deceased family member.

In an effort to recognize those animals that have crossed the Rainbow Bridge, the International Association of Pet Cemeteries designated the second Sunday of September - tomorrow - as National Pet Memorial Day.

To mark the event, both of Bideawee's Long Island locations, in Wantagh and Westhampton will observe their annual Pet Memorial Day at 1p.m. today at their respective pet memorial parks. Visit bideawee.org for more info.

The Hartsdale Pet Cemetery is hosting a blessing of the animals ceremony, beginning at 1p.m. tomorrow, along with an adoption event and a K-9 demonstration. For info, go to www.petcem.com.

Since 1896, 70,000 animals have been interred on the Westchester County grounds. Last year, 700 animals were buried and 31,000 animals were cremated there. And the cremated remains of about 20 humans are buried alongside their pets.

"People have always cared about their pets," said Ed Martin 3rd, vice president of the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery. "After 17 years, the attachment is there."

The average cost to bury a pet, which includes a plot of land, a casket, and burial, averages about \$1,500, but can run upward of \$5,000. The average cost of cremation is about \$200 to \$300.

Still, the market is flooded by an array of memorial products ranging from pet grave markers and urns, to sympathy cards, headstones, custom-made caskets, floral arrangements and keepsake boxes.

"It's an exploding niche," says Colleen Mihelich, who runs peternity.com. The California-based Web site offers handcrafted memorial gifts and accessories, along with virtual memorials, custom art and pet loss support.

Among the more unique products are abstract paintings mixed with the pet's ashes, pet "cremains" jewelry, and Kidoodlyrock, a pet memorial marker engraved with a child's drawing of their pet, helps kids deal with their grief.

For more info on memorializing pets go to the International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories at www.iaopc.com.

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