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# When a friend dies

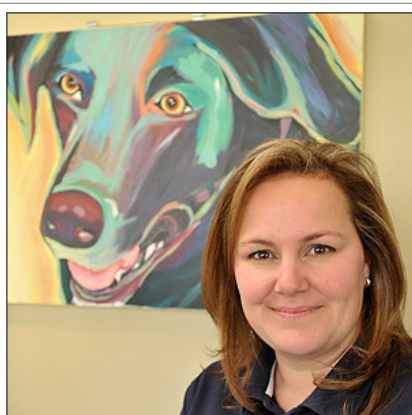
## Dog owners try to cope with loss

By THERESA WINSLOW, Staff Writer

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Paul W. Gillespie — The Capital

Audrey Reichardt, co-owner of Dogwood Acres Pet Retreat in Davidsonville, stands next to a picture of her beloved dog, Casey, who died last year. Reichardt decided to start a partnership with the Hospice of the Chesapeake for a series of free pet loss workshops.

Rick Kaufmann tried to contain his emotions. He's a cop, after all.

But surrounded by pictures of his dog Chief, Rick let himself go. He cried, briefly, for the Doberman that passed away two days earlier. His wife, Marilyn Katatsky, didn't bother containing herself. She wept openly.

Not everyone they've encountered has grasped the depth of their sorrow, their feelings of emptiness. Last week at least, they weren't alone with their grief.

As the couple muscled through their loss of Chief, others around them also grabbed tissues, mourning the deaths of their own pets. Such was the nature of a two-hour pet loss workshop in Davidsonville, as a group of dog owners shared memories and created mementos to help them grieve.

"I'm a former Army colonel, and now I'm a police officer," said Rick, a sergeant with the Natural Resources Police. "We're not supposed to show emotion. But I think Chief looked down said it was OK."

Rick didn't want to go to the workshop, which was held at Dogwood Acres Pet Retreat and co-sponsored by Hospice of the Chesapeake. Marilyn convinced him otherwise.

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"We have no children," said Marilyn. "Chief was our child. Our whole life was around this dog."

They plan to store the keepsakes they made during the workshop in their living room. Marilyn drew a picture of Chief on a round piece of glass, and both wrote long messages to their pet on special pieces of parchment. Chief was a rescue and 11 or 12 years old at the time of his death.

The couple had the most recent loss, but the wounds were still fresh for others. Felicia Ritter of Glen Burnie lost three dogs in four months, Casey Richardson of Severna Park

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lost her dog just after Christmas, and Robbin and Sarah Witlen of Davidsonville lost their dog three weeks ago.

"We have to accept this feels horrible," said Maggie Morton, a bereavement counselor from The Life Center at hospice who ran the workshop. "Some people say, 'It's only a dog, or it's only a cat.' They don't get it."

This is the second year Dogwood has hosted the free workshops. Three more sessions are scheduled this year. Since close to 40 percent of U.S. households have a dog, it's no surprise that similar sessions have sprung up around the country.

Audrey Reichardt, who runs Dogwood with her husband, said the workshops are a way for their clients to come full circle. She said they help people choose dogs, train them, and watch them grow up. So, why not help out at the end of life, too? "Having gone through it myself, (I know) it can be difficult to mourn a pet," said Reichardt, whose dog died about a year ago.

Morton encouraged people to bring pictures of their pets, and take time to tell stories about them. She recommended against running out and immediately getting another dog. "There is no such thing as a replacement," she said. "I get why people do it, but I'm not sure it's the best thing for the dog."

### Dog day afternoon

Morton began the workshop with introductions, then had the dog owners begin talking about their pets by writing about them.

Marilynn made a quick sketch of Chief as Rick jotted down some thoughts. "It's important to acknowledge where and how we see animals and how they impact our lives," Morton said.

She mixed exercises in the afternoon session with poetry. She reviewed the grief process, and explained some of the ways it effects people physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually.

The grief process has six parts: acknowledging the loss, embracing the loss, remembering the one who died, developing a new self-identity without the one lost, searching for meaning, and receiving support. This is the same process she uses when she counsels humans.

The dog owners, meanwhile, talked about when their pets got sick, their final days, and the shock of the loss.

"It's a very large hole," Sarah said of Duncan, the family's border collie, who died Feb. 15, two weeks shy of his 14th birthday.

Casey, who is grieving 15½ year-old Woody, feels as if she has been living a nightmare. "It doesn't seem real," she said. "I have no enthusiasm. The pain is so great, you just want it to stop."

Casey put her dog down Dec. 27, and told the group she was so depressed that she is just starting to want to do things around the house again. Felicia admitted she had a hard time getting off the couch after her dogs died.

As a veterinary technician, Felicia confronts the loss of pets daily, but it didn't make things any easier when it happened to her. While dabbing her eyes with Kleenex, she wrote notes to Katie, Kody and Babe, and shared them with the class.

"To Katie: Thank you for saving my life ... I'll miss you forever."

"Kody, Thank you for being Mom's protector."

"Babe, love you and miss you."

Dogwood Acres will host additional pet loss workshops on June 5, Sept. 18 and Nov. 13. All are from 1 to 3 p.m. on Sundays. The workshops are free, but reservations are required. Call 410-798-4776 or email [jdorsey@dogwoodacres.com](mailto:jdorsey@dogwoodacres.com). For more information on Dogwood Acres, 439 West Central Ave., Davidsonville, visit [www.dogwoodacres.com](http://www.dogwoodacres.com).

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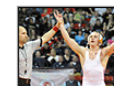

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