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PROFILE

A Healthy Relationship

Pet Ownership Benefits Animals and the Elderly

by John VanZile

Sometimes, all it takes is a cold nose to make a heart warm. While pets are well known for their ability to bring joy to their owners' lives, scientists have confirmed what many pet owners already suspected—that companion animals also can bring good health to their owners.

A recent study published in the *Journal of Clinical Nursing* found that elderly pet owners are significantly healthier than their “pet-less” counterparts.¹ This study is part of a growing body of evidence suggesting that elderly pet owners have lower blood pressure and stress levels, get more exercise, and generally are healthier than older people without pets.^{2,3}

These wide-ranging benefits spring from the relationship between pets and their owners. For many seniors who live alone and are sometimes sick and often withdrawn from society, pets are the best reason to get out of bed in the morning. The animals demand care, love, and attention, and meeting these life-affirming needs is good for both the caretaker and the cared for.



Bringing Pets to the Elderly

Many people might read this information and file it away for their own future use. But Avvy Katz of Boca Raton, FL, did not. Instead, he did something about it.



Avvy Katz

Katz is a successful entrepreneur who operated a mail-order business in Cleveland, OH, until 1998, when he sold the business and used the proceeds to establish the Avrum Katz Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides financial support to the Pets For the Elderly Foundation.

“I’ve always had an interest in animals,” Katz said of his desire to create the Pets For the Elderly Foundation. “There’s a vast amount of information available that indicates how important animals can be to people who are alone.”

Katz himself is a good example of practicing what he preaches. For many years, he had a cherished German shepherd, Caesar, who was his best friend and companion. Caesar passed away some time ago, however, and Katz recently adopted a new pet, a miniature schnauzer named Sammy.

Through his foundation, Katz has helped thousands of fellow seniors bring companionship to their lives. Pets For the Elderly works in partnership with more than 50 animal shelters throughout the US, including those in south Florida. Last year, the organization paid adoption fees for 5,000 companion animals, including both cats and dogs.

The program’s benefits are enormous and well documented. Studies confirming the health benefits of pet ownership have appeared in such respected publications as the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* and the *Mayo Clinic HealthOasis Newsletter*.

Dr. Edward T. Creagan, an oncologist at the Mayo Clinic, has written extensively about the health benefits of pet ownership.

“Senior citizens who own pets are less likely to be depressed, are better able to tolerate social isolation, and are more active than those who do not own pets,” according to Dr. Creagan. “We all need something to live for and something to focus on, besides ourselves. Pets offer us unconditional love, which is of significant benefit to our overall well-being.”⁴



Katz knows very well the benefits that pets can bring. Quite apart from the testimonials offered by grateful seniors who adopted pets through Pets For the Elderly, the scientific literature confirms the health benefits of pet ownership, according to Katz.

“There’s no doubt a pet can have enormous benefits to someone who’s ill,” Katz says. “A lot of dogs are certified to visit nursing homes or hospitals. I’ve heard of ill people who aren’t talking but react to animals. If someone is sick or alone, a pet is a great help.”

Animals Also Benefit

Katz’s foundation also benefits the animals themselves. Pets For the Elderly works exclusively with animal shelters, which are overrun with unwanted animals. According to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, euthanasia of healthy, adoptable animals is the leading cause of death for both dogs and cats in the US. Although reliable national figures are hard to come by, most experts estimate that millions of cats and dogs are euthanized every year because no one will adopt them. Katz himself estimates that some shelters euthanize two of every three animals that come into their care.



But Pets For the Elderly offers a better alternative. The organization enables shelters to place animals into loving homes where they are lavished with attention from their grateful owners. The shelters offer this service to all seniors, regardless of income. Potential adopters must be over 60 and show they are responsible pet owners who can take care of the animal.

This work is so important to Katz that he has truly put his money where his mouth is, with his foundation being the primary source of funding for the Pets For the Elderly Foundation. His dedication to the cause has paid off by attracting big-name organizations and individuals to Pets For the Elderly. Noted actor Tony Randall has recorded radio and television public service announcements for free, and the Pets For the Elderly board includes members from the American Humane Association, the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, and Texas A&M University.

“This, in a sense, justifies my own existence,” Katz says.

Even with Katz’s considerable personal contributions, the organization is still in its infancy. Katz says that despite a waiting list of animal shelters seeking to participate in the program, Pets For the Elderly lacks the funds to further expand at this time.

In response to this overwhelming demand, Pets For the Elderly is launching a nationwide drive to attract new funding. The Cleveland-based organization is planning mass mailings to Fortune 500 companies and fundraising events across the US. American Greetings, the greeting card company, already has signed on as a corporate sponsor.

Katz hopes to spread the benefits of pet ownership to any senior who is willing to accept the joy and responsibility of taking care of an animal.

Besides his interest in spreading the word about pet ownership, Katz is dedicated to his own personal health program. He estimates that he takes 60 to 70 supplements daily and gets regular exercise on a stationary bike.

“With advancing years, I have arthritis and back problems,” Katz says.

His daily regimen includes compounds and supplements that have been shown to help ease joint pain, help prevent prostate cancer, and support cognitive function. These include Life Extension products such as Cognitex, Super MiraForte, Super GLA/DHA, SAME, ArthroPro, Natural Prostate Formula, and lowdose aspirin.

And, of course, he takes comfort from the presence of Sammy, his miniature Schnauzer. “I probably would have been better off with a cat,” Katz jokes. “They’re more independent and don’t have to be walked. But I’ve always liked dogs.”

Those wishing to contribute may send their donation to Pets For the Elderly, 3681 South Green Rd., Suite 302, Beachwood, OH 44122. For additional payment options, visit the Pets For the Elderly website at www.petsfortheelderly.org.

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