

SENIOR SCAPE: Seniors & Pets

By **Doug LeGallais**

In my nearly 40 years of practicing Veterinary Medicine I came to see the benefits of pet ownership in many forms throughout our lives.

A family pet can have an impact on every member of the family, from young to old. They can teach young children empathy towards another creature by loving and caring for something other than themselves while older children can experience the reward of being responsible, even in a small way, for others' needs.

As adults, we can benefit from owning a pet in innumerable ways.

Sports minded folks can enjoy training and working with their breed of choice while people with a disability can find companionship and have their lives enhanced by a pet trained to assist them.

Then there is the family pet who becomes an integral part of the family, while others enjoy working with their dog in the show ring, at the agility course or in visiting hospitals or seniors' residents with their Therapy Dog.

Aside from dogs and cats, birds, pocket-pets and fish also bring pleasure to their owners.

However, one group who can benefit the most from the presence of a pet is seniors.

Most people undergo great changes as they age. Eventually they retire from their profession or job around the same time the kids leave the nest, while many experience the loss of a lifetime partner.

Younger seniors can sometimes find the change to retirement difficult. Even if they keep busy with activities and charity work it can still be a difficult adjustment. Often a pet can be that comforting bridge between their old life and the new one.

Caring for a pet can take a senior's mind off themselves and give them a sense of purpose. It has often been said, by those who have lost a spouse, that the worst part is coming home to an empty house.

The addition of that living, breathing companion can bring enormous comfort. For those that are house bound, having a furry friend to spend their time with or listening to the sweet chirping of a pet bird can make the difference between another lonely day and one that has meaning.

As people age, they often find themselves living in some sort of Assisted Living facility. In some cases pets are allowed, or there is a resident dog or cat that makes the place seem so much more like home.

If these options are not available, there are wonderful organizations that offer pet visitation from trained volunteers and their dogs.

My wife Linda was involved with the Therapy Dog Organization with all three of our past dogs. She can describe the incredible impact the visit from a friendly dog had on many of the residents. She was particularly moved by the reaction she often received from those suffering from memory impairment.

?It was often as though a light went on in their eyes and a smile would touch their lips. Who knew what lovely memories had surfaced.?

Recently my wife and I lost our beloved Chesapeake Bay Retriever, Surfer. It was devastating and left a real hole in our lives. However, we knew how important it was for our own happiness to have a dog around the house, so we have just adopted a beautiful Standard Poodle puppy named Splash.

Watching her bounce around the house helps to lighten the weight of our sadness over our loss and brings joy back into the house. We know she will, for all the trouble, expense and sometimes inconvenience a puppy can be, be well worth it.