

AFD Profile

By Tanya Kenevich



Photo: Doyle Shugart shows the viewing room of his family's new pet funeral home in Atlanta.

A Dedication to Pet Loss

As a family comes to terms with a death of a loved one, those who are the decision-makers only want the best for the deceased loved one. They want a full-service funeral, embalming, keepsakes and a special urn for the cremation. The family mourns over the casket, feeling incomprehensible loss and grief; they cry uncontrollably and say farewell as they see their deceased family member being placed inside the cremator. But this deceased loved one isn't the esteemed family patriarch or a beloved aunt or uncle; it's Scruffy, the family dog.

This scenario is not uncommon and will certainly become more prevalent in 2011 and beyond, as the interest in pet ownership and dedication continues to grow. According to the Hartz Human-Animal Bond Survey, conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of the Hartz Mountain Corp. in 2005, 76 percent of pet owners say that their pet is their loyal companion and part of the family. In addition, the survey showed that 56 percent of women and 41 percent of men talk about their pet to their friends and family as if it is a member of the family, and 48 percent say that their pet sleeps on the bed and hogs the covers and the pillow.

Taking this information a step further in the financial realm, a BusinessWeek article stated that pet owners

spent \$41 billion on their pets in 2007 – double the amount spent on pets a decade ago.

If this is how the pet owners of 2011 are feeling about their animal companions, is it really so shocking that the pet loss industry continues to grow, even in times of economic difficulty?

One pet loss business that understands this ever-growing need is Deceased Pet Care Funeral Home, Crematories & Cemeteries, based in Georgia. The company has been owned and operated by the Shugart family for nearly 40 years, its humble beginnings starting with Doyle and Maudann Shugart in 1972. What



Photo: (back row left to right) Kyle Shugart, Donna Shugart-Bethune, Letitia Shugart and Keith Shugart (sitting left to right) Doyle L. Shugart and Maudann Shugart

started as a modest crematory founded by a married couple yearning to give pets the dignity they deserve has turned into a well-known Atlanta staple with four locations and an unsurpassed commitment to the service and memorialization of deceased pets.

Humble Beginnings

Deceased Pet Care, although highly respected in the Atlanta area, started out small. "We just were in a very, very small location – about 1,500 square feet. A little bitty brick building that (Doyle) started out in," said Donna Shugart-Bethune, director of public relations for Deceased Pet Care and one of Doyle and Maudann Shugart's three grown children.

But even with the funeral home's small quarters, the quality of service given by the Shugart family was very high.

"We've always offered full services for pet owners, anything from burial to individual pet cemeteries to cremation. Everything from embalming of a pet to

a full viewing, graveside services to individual same-day services where you can actually be with your pet during the cremation process," Shugart-Bethune said. "We can have a private cremation with the pet owner on site, so our services in terms of what we've offered, we've had those services all along from the beginning."

Doyle Shugart, founder and president of Deceased Pet Care, said, "It was always, to me, like it should be established as a funeral home for humans ... except it would be for pets from the very beginning."

In addition to providing meaningful service and support to pet families, Deceased Pet Care also found importance in keeping relationships with the community healthy and intact, which helped the positive word of mouth grow. "We are a very long-standing establishment here in Atlanta," Shugart-Bethune said. "I think our veterinarians recognize that and partner with us and we do the same with them, so it actually helps

build that community relationship among our veterinarians (and) among our business partners to provide more networking, both for them and for us."

As the business grew in Atlanta, it was evident that the building was going to need to grow along with it. "We moved into temporary trailers for a year while they tore the old building down and put the new building up," Shugart-Bethune said. "We went from a 1,500-square-foot building to about an 8,000-square-foot building on two floors."

She added, "This has been a 40-year-old-long dream of our family, to be able to provide all the amenities that we felt like the aftercare industry needed."

Perfecting Pet Loss Service

Deceased Pet Care's new pet funeral home, which had its official grand opening in February 2011, is the largest full-service pet funeral home in the United States, according to the



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“When you walk in the front door of our lobby, you have a garden that has birds as well as a fish pond. We wanted to send that feeling of life – not to feel like you’re entering in a sad, depressing place.” - Donna Shugart-Bethune

company. It exponentially steps up the level of comfort for families and the availability of services and space, which includes individual counseling rooms that are set up like small living rooms. This is where clients can meet privately with an employee or a grief counselor of the funeral home. The grand size of the new funeral home makes business more efficient as well; it can now handle three pet funeral services at the same time.

“It will be much more than a crematory for pets. There is a great desire across the nation at this time to provide cremation services for pets,” Shugart said. “What everyone is going to have to realize is that you’re more than just a crematory for pets, that you need a full-service funeral home where you can have services, where you can have embalming, where you can have a schedule for cremation, where you can have a

chapel in the cemetery itself or in the funeral home.”

The aesthetic appeal of the new funeral home, contrary to the older Deceased Pet Care building, was also improved. “What we did in the design of the funeral home ... we really wanted to make it feel really warm and inviting and soothing and at the same time, life-affirming,” Shugart-Bethune said. “When you walk in the front door of our lobby, you have a garden

Are you ready to serve every member of their family?

While many of us remember burying a goldfish in the backyard or searching for a shoebox to create a miniature casket, simple disposition is no longer satisfactory for a growing segment of American society. Not only are they turning to funeral homes to provide services, but increasingly, they want to prepay for these services.

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Rooms were also designed and decorated to look comfortable and warm, instead of feeling like a cold office or business room. And since the business is family owned (Doyle runs the business with his wife Maudann and their children Keith, Donna and Kyle), the "family tree" theme of Deceased Pet Care continues throughout all the rooms at the funeral home. "We have a Cypress Room, we have an Oak Room, we have a Dogwood Room and we have the Magnolia Chapel ... it was really planned and thought out to provide comfort as you go through the funeral home," Shugart-Bethune said. "Our showroom was planned and thought out with the intention of it being something that you'd see in your own living room if you had

bookcases. It was a showroom designed to make you feel at home."

One of the most intriguing aspects of the funeral home isn't as common as other pet loss services in other firms but could be just as important – if not more so.

"We actually have a euthanasia room; we call it the Willow Room, and it allows mobile veterinarians to meet pet parents here and it's set up very much like a warm bedroom," Shugart-Bethune said. "There is a customized, oversized bed that we have basically designed and created using fabrics that are nonporous and that are easily cleaned, along with the flooring and the wall coverings."

As an example, if there is a large pet or a very sick pet and the pet owner did not want to euthanize the pet in their own home or in a veterinarian's office, they can continue with the process in a comforting and quiet place like the Willow Room.

"We've actually had clients tell us that they never went back to the veterinarian that euthanized their last pet because they could not take the memory of going back there and seeing that same room," Shugart-Bethune said. "So it gives those clients and those mobile veterinarians the option to meet here and have that process done."

The Willow Room has been very well received by clients and veterinarians, as the pet parent can spend the last moments of his or her pet's life in the room, with soft music and the sound of a water fountain lightly flowing in the background. "Until you've gone through that process, you have no idea how heart-wrenching it is," Shugart-Bethune said. "This is a comforting, quiet place."

Another uncommon offering by Deceased Pet Care is the service of freeze-drying one's pet – which is not an easy process and takes several months. In order for a client to choose this option, the pet must be under preservation as soon as possible in a cooler or freezer, because there cannot be any deterioration to start the process for freeze-drying the animal.

"We take the pet at the time, and we place it in a cooler facility that is somewhere between 25 and 31 degrees Fahrenheit. The pet would be in a frozen position at the time that we talk to the pet owner (before the freezing), we like to get a picture of the way they want their pet to be posed," Shugart said. "They can be posed in four or five different positions, like in the fetal position, or sitting in front of a fireplace, or either up on its haunches begging for food or whatever position that they want it in, whether the eyes will be open or closed, if they want that done."

Shugart-Bethune is quick to add that this process is not taxidermy. "The importance of the freeze-drying is that the pet is posed in the way that gives comfort to the pet owner. So having that picture and that conversation can really give what the pet owner is looking for," Shugart-



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Bethune said. "It's not one of our high-demand services. It's for a very select, elite group of clients. It's a very tedious, ongoing process determining what the client is looking for and providing that level of comfort that the pet owner is seeking."

Acknowledging a Pet Lost

Since its founding, Deceased Pet Care has provided grief counseling for pet owners to the highest acclaim.

"Everyone on our staff, especially those who answer the phones, they provide grief therapy on a daily basis talking with pet owners and contacting them," Shugart said. "If they want to take a few minutes and discuss their pet's life, our counselors are trained to do that. If they sense that this person, this client on the phone, needs more conversation, then we have a list of grief therapy counselors for that client in their

area. We try to arrange that for them and get them in touch with a person with a degree in grief therapy."

Shugart-Bethune added, "The grief process is not just as simple as taking care of the pet and just providing a cremation. It's just so much more than that. It's understanding where that pet owner is coming from and helping them through the process, providing that level of comfort along the way and knowing that the relationship with a pet is so different from a human relationship."

She continued, "With a human, there is a lot of emotional baggage and emotional ties, where with a pet, there's sort of an unconditional love and bonding that you're not going to have in all relationships of your life – probably in any relationship of your life. It's a different type of grief that a pet owner goes through."

Shugart explained, "It's just that so many of our clients remember us from the past and you have what you call repeat services or repeat business of clients that we have come to realize that they need the same understanding as if a member of the family passed away."

He added, "The aftercare for grief is there for the pet owner. If they could just sit down with you and just talk about it and discuss it for a few minutes, it just gives a great relief to them, and they remember that. They remember the conversation you had with them."

Deceased Pet Care has four locations in Georgia, which include offices, chapels, showrooms, cemeteries, crematories and more – but the services that the business can provide aren't limited.

"As a full-service funeral home, we provide any kind of service that you could possibly think of," Shugart said. "We can handle that service, we can take care of it, and if you want to custom-design the service, we can custom-make it for you."

He added, "We've had the concept from the very beginning that a service for pets should always be set up on the same type of service that you would have for a human. And that is what we've always followed." ❖

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