



The Animal Love & Loss Network Newsletter

Volume Number 1

Issue Number 2

August, 2002

THE ANIMAL LOVE & LOSS NETWORK: Many Things to Many People

-Medea Berkman

Since designing and implementing my own animal loss support services back in 1992, (see "Paw to Heart" article below) I had hoped to find a place where I might share my triumphs and pitfalls with those who understood the intensity of this type of work. I had envisioned not another "organization," but a web of friendship, caring and support, with the commonality being a deep concern for all animals and the humans who love and care for them. I am proud to be a strand in that "web" that is the Animal Love & Loss Network. For me, ALLN provides a forum for the sharing of ideas and insights related to the growing field of animal loss & bereavement counseling. We also serve as an educational resource center for all topics concerning animals. Above all, we offer--through our three chat rooms and telephone contacts--a support system to those mourning the loss or illness of an animal family member. Those of us on the Board of ALLN always have a shoulder or an ear in our own time of need as well. As the ALLN Support Group

Chairperson, I cannot emphasize more strongly the benefits of support groups (in

person or 'on-line') in helping people move through the pain of loss and separation. People make up ALLN, but it is our animals who inspire us--making our 'network' the perfect place to meet and interact with others who appreciate and respect this most significant bond.

PAW TO HEART--'Ten Years Of Mending Broken Hearts'

-Medea Berkman

This year, 2002, marks the tenth anniversary of the inception of The Paw to Heart Animal Bereavement Support Services. The organization was implemented in 1992 following the loss of my feline soul mate, SHASTA. Shasta and her sister SHEBA, along with my canine nephew SAMSON, provided the inspiration for the many services we offer grieving animal lovers. Being the first on-going group of its kind on Long Island, you might say we were "pioneers" of sorts in this still often misunderstood area of bereavement. On the last Monday of each month you will find people from all walks of life gathered together at The Plainview-Old Bethpage Library in Plainview, New York, to share their pain over losing a family member.

The deceased "family member" in this case, however, most likely walked on four legs or had feathers, fins or scales.

Ten years ago, our support groups attracted only between 2-5 people, whereas today we average 8-10 people, and it is no longer an anomaly to find 15 or more mourners filling the room. The last several meetings found men making up the majority of those in attendance. Who would have imagined we'd ever come to see a New York City detective pouring his heart out over the loss of his special feline friend? Years ago men only came to the groups to "support their wives or girlfriends," but certainly not to address their own grief.

Over the last decade we have made obvious strides in helping to normalize the very real and intense feelings brought about by the loss of an animal companion. Still, much work remains if we are to bring these very important issues of animal loss and bereavement to the level of acceptance that is needed and deserved."

Medea D. Berkman, Supportive Care Counselor, Paw to Heart, is also an ALLN Chat Host, Support Group Chairperson, ALLN founder, & serves on the ALLN Board of Directors.

Paw to Heart offers education, support groups and workshops on the topic of animal loss and bereavement. All of our services are free of charge to the community, and available to anyone who is dealing with the loss, separation, injury or illness of an animal.

For further information on 'Paw to Heart,' please visit our website at www.pawtoheart.org or call (516) 785-6416.

TRIBUTE TO MICKEY

*December 8, 1980 - July 15, 1996
-Elaine Stillwell
Rockville Center, New York*

Fortunately, I gave in when my son Denis begged for a black Labrador Retriever for his 16th birthday! He named him "Michelob," which quickly turned into "Mickey." Five years later, when Denis was 21, he and his 19-year-old sister, Peggy, were killed in the same auto accident. My husband, Joe, my only remaining child, Annie, and I were left in the loving care of Mickey.

That precious animal, a black lab mix, has been the healing backbone of this family. How can we ever thank him for nurturing us so tenderly and completely? We thank him for just sitting next to us, looking at us with those big brown eyes that said: "I care," doing things to make us laugh, getting us out to exercise a few times a day, licking away our tears, and snuggling on the sofa or in bed with us. He got us out of bed in the morning, steered us to the refrigerator, led us to the back door, walked us gently around

the block while listening to all our woes. He let us cry our hearts out, and never told anybody our secrets. No money could ever repay this dog for this gentle, caring therapy!

He had been spoiled rotten by three teenagers who had barred their souls to him, and he had been their constant shadow. Playing Frisbee with Denis, baking cookies with Peggy, being teased by Annie; he befriended each in a different way and was a sounding board for the ups and downs of teenage-hood. Life had been wonderful, but all of a sudden, Denis and Peggy were gone forever, and three weeks later, Annie left for her freshman year at college. Mickey walked searchingly from room to room, trying to figure out where every one was and why it was so quiet. Eventually, he knew he had a big job on his hands—to keep us going and to make us feel alive again.

At the train station, he'd jump out the car window to welcome Annie home from college! That cheery greeting did a lot for her heart. At home, he'd run upstairs with her, help her unpack her duffle bag and drag out anything that appealed to him. He helped "fill up" the bedroom she had shared with Peggy and made sure Annie didn't feel the loneliness of being the "only child." At night, he'd snuggle under Annie's covers and sometimes stretch out with those four powerful legs and push her out of bed, claiming it all for himself; we would hear them fighting for their own territory. When

Annie wasn't around, he'd stealthily climb onto our bed and creep in between us, falling sound asleep on the electric blanket he loved. We couldn't wake up and not smile, even when visions of Peggy and Denis haunted our souls.

Petting him, stroking his furry ears or scratching his tummy gave us such peace. We all said he had the fastest tongue in the east. Hors d'oeuvres were "open season," and barbeque steaks had to be carefully guarded. Keeping us all busy, he nurtured us through the rough days and made us nurture him. When he was three years old, he developed epilepsy, which is common in labs. To prevent future seizures, he had to take daily medicine, which meant we had to make sure we gave him his pills each morning. He dutifully gobbled them up.

Whenever we were sick in bed, he'd climb right in with us and never leave our sides. He always made us feel better. That's why we called him "Head Nurse."

How can we ever thank him for nurturing us so tenderly and completely?

He'd lie by the front door each day, waiting for us to return from work. We could set our clocks by him. Even when we went on trips, he sensed the exact time of our arrival home and would be

waiting to greet us wildly at the front door.

We couldn't open the refrigerator without his being right there next to us, appearing out of nowhere! As I cooked dinner, he'd lie by my feet. As I ironed, he curled up under the ironing board. As I did laundry, he'd march up and down the cellar stairs with me. As I unpacked the groceries, he'd stick his head in each bag, and many times, strutted around the kitchen with the paper bag on his head!

All the third-graders I've taught over the last fifteen years knew and loved Mickey and could write voraciously about him. They knew if they didn't do their homework, I'd have to tell Mickey and nobody wanted to upset Mickey. He was a legend in my school and especially loved since everyone knew there was no homework on Mickey's birthday.

As I faithfully walked him each day, I'd look up to Heaven and whisper gratefully to my son: "Thanks for Mickey. He makes my heart sing!" But as Mickey approached the age of 14, a little slower and a tad stiffer, no longer able to leap onto the sofa or bed, but still as loveable with the same radiant smile, my husband and I wondered: "What will we do if something happens to Mickey? Will we get another dog? Should we get one before Mickey joins Peggy and Denis, or *should we be free as birds and have no dog at all?*"

Before we could reach a decision, the phone rang and my cousin pleaded: "I have to

find a home for a 2 year-old pedigreed black lab. Would you like to have him?"

Whenever I felt sad, his smile made me feel good all over.

It was a wonderful year-and-a-half until our dear little Mickey's hind legs couldn't match his strong heart. Tearfully, we bid a tender farewell to our gentle, loving 15 ½ year old caretaker and tightly hugged. His protégé ...just three weeks before Peggy and Denis' tenth death anniversaries, August 2 and August 6

Elaine E. Stillwell is a Bereavement Counselor at the Office of Family Ministry-Diocese of Rockville Center, 50 No. Park Ave., Rockville Centre, NY. 11571.

Article first published in ***Bereavement Magazine***, Nov./Dec., 1996. Republished with permission of the author.



A LONG ROAD FOR NIKKI

--Nancy Rodgers

On October 3, 2000 my oldest female, Nikki, was injured and became paralyzed. Our vet determined that she had paralysis in her hindquarters. He gave her a couple of shots, which we continued for three days, and then gave us medicine to take with us when we brought her home. At home, we laid her in her crate. She could not do anything, even urinate on her own.

Over a few weeks, she went from a crate to a dog bed with

a baby play yard put up around her. We wanted to protect her from the other dogs and keep her quiet. The vet said that it could take several months for Nikki to get back to "normal," if she ever did. Nikki was 7 years old at the time, and although she was otherwise in good health, after only two days, several people told us that we should consider euthanasia for her. I didn't want to give up on her, or underestimate her capacity to heal. I wanted to give her at least a couple of months, and her vet agreed to let me try.

The next two months were very long months. For the first two weeks, she would get her medicine twice daily. We had to carry her outside to go to the bathroom – if we were lucky enough to catch her in time. I started sitting on the floor with her 4-5 times a day, rubbing her back legs and her back. I would rub her feet to make sure that there was still sensation in them. We were concerned about nerve damage. We read somewhere that a whirlpool bath is good for paralyzed dogs. I asked my vet, and he said that it was worth a try. We did the baths 2-3 times a week. Every time we used it, she could move a little bit. We were all thrilled. After about two and a half months of the whirlpool baths, rubbing her back and legs, she was able to get up and move a little. She made steady progress.

It has been almost 23 months now since her injury. She still has some stiffness in the mornings, or after she sleeps for a while however, she is able to walk without much

difficulty, go up and down stairs, play with the other dogs, and jump around. She even barks at the other dogs to play with her.

Nikki may not be back to "normal" but she is doing much better than we had imagined that October. I am so thankful that I did not listen to all the people who said that euthanasia was the only thing for us to do for her. Going through this experience with Nikki taught me two things: One, that I have more patience than I thought I did; and two, euthanasia is something that, when it is the right thing to do, we will know it.

Nancy Rodgers is the President of ALLN, one of its founders, and a long-time Bedlington breeder in Illinois, where she now works for a veterinarian.

GROWING THROUGH LOSS

-- Katie Nurmi

For so many of us, grieving for a beloved animal companion is further complicated by the messages around us that suggest our grief is invalid, or even "abnormal." The sometimes well-intended, but nevertheless insensitive people who tell us; "You can always get another dog / cat," "It was just a dog / cat," or to "just get over it," often prompt us to go underground with our feelings. Others, who may initially appear to validate our grief, would have us believe that we can "heal" in a matter of days or weeks. Sharing our grief and profound sense of emptiness with others is undeniably the first step toward healing. We need validation of our loss and pain, for it is

precisely this validation and support which allow us to move through the pain and ultimately accept the loss. When what we perceive in those around us is a total lack of understanding & compassion, or pressure to "get over it," the resulting experience of "disfranchised" grief may prompt us to further isolate ourselves emotionally. When we are isolated in this way, it is all too common to feel that our pain--the pain we cannot and dare not express--is all that is left of our beloved companion.

We all know too well that guilt is an inevitable unwelcome visitor at a time of pet loss. It is natural to second-guess ourselves, to identify something we could, or more often "should," have done differently. I believe that our feelings of guilt are an essential part of what Elizabeth Kubler-Ross calls the "bargaining stage" of bereavement. Making ourselves culpable in some way may help to protect us from the painful sense of loss of control in the circumstances of our loss. Ultimately, however, our self-doubts and "what-ifs" may make guilt central to our emotional landscape, clearing the path for a debilitating sense of shame.

Shame originates in a fear of being or feeling "exposed." We may fear the exposure of what we see as our responsibility or failure in the circumstances of the loss. We fear being exposed as having "let down" a devoted friend. It is also quite common to fear revealing the depth of our grief and the effect it has on

us. We hesitate to share our grief, not knowing (as I have heard so frequently in the chats) who is "safe to tell." Without the essential validation of others, and the opportunity to discover that so many people experience a similar sense of devastation and emptiness, it becomes quite easy to consider our own reactions as "abnormal," "mental," or "psycho," just a few of our society's most debilitating labels. Naturally, we fear any of these labels. Our sense of guilt and shame isolates us to the extent that we rob ourselves of the support of others. If we feel we cannot share our feelings and ourselves, we cannot discover that we are far from alone in our response to the loss. Since isolation fuels shame, and shame fuels both guilt and isolation, this becomes a vicious cycle, one from which it can be extremely difficult to escape.

We hesitate to share our grief, not knowing who is "safe to tell."

The antidote for shame, I have often been told, is to "speak our truth," to open up the very feelings we feel so ashamed of. To quote a poet friend of mine, "Noise is frightening, but silence kills." Those of us who are here out of commitment to the validity of this grief, have experienced it ourselves, and often alone. Many, if not most of us have learned from our own loss experiences that there is profound gratitude for the exceptional gifts our departed pets have given us--

understanding, compassion and unconditional love and support. There lies a deep sense of peace in this realization. We learn also, that we can now share these same gifts with others in our lives. Many of us provide to others who are in profound bereavement, what we would have benefited from ourselves. For me, therein lies something quite beautiful, and I firmly believe that one may find in the ALLN chat rooms and our organization's membership, the very best of human nature.

I would, however, like to offer another perspective on grief and loss. Instead of shame, let us consider its direct opposite; dignity, even pride. To have loved well, and to have been loved, is a significant part of the magic we find in our lives. We all know how profound our love for our animal companions can be, and the love returned to us is beautiful. But "love," as a verb, requires both risk-taking and trust, neither of which is for the weak of spirit. It is an enormous risk to bring into our lives gentle souls who, we must anticipate, will not outlive us. When we enter into the loving, emotionally intimate bond we share with companion animals, we do so with the awareness, albeit often not fully acknowledged, that we will eventually have to cope with their deaths, yet we take that risk willingly. This is done, however, with a profound trust that the goodness these animals bring into our lives will far outweigh the pain of eventual loss. It requires great courage to accept the inevitable pain of loss and bereavement. In my opinion,

courage is the willingness to accept this risk; to trust the strength and goodness of the bond we forge with our animal companions in the face of inevitable pain. Most of us ultimately find a profound sense of gratitude for the time and love that is shared. This is certainly nothing to be ashamed of.

One undeniable truth about the experiences of both love & loss is that we are forever altered by it. Whether the loss is the inevitable and anticipated one that comes with age or infirmity, or one of the myriad of "tragic" and "unfair" premature losses with which so many of us are so painfully familiar, loss, like love, cannot be "undone." Our loved ones leave huge "holes" in our lives when they die. But these spaces are never truly empty; our beloved departed companions dwell in them. At the time of loss, the "holes" in our lives are filled with pain. Healing takes place as we share our pain with others, are validated, and learn that we are far from alone. Much of the pain is nudged out, as we share our loving memories and our recognition of the amazing gifts our beloved companions have bestowed upon us. The intense pain yields to a sense of the "bittersweet" pain, which will always revisit us, but will not kill us. The healing process also leaves us with an enhanced awareness of personal growth. If we are courageous enough to make ourselves sufficiently vulnerable to both love, and to *be loved*, we will experience personal growth. As Samuel Johnson said:

"Courage is the greatest of all virtues, because if you haven't courage, you may not have the opportunity to use any of the others."

I know my own losses have provided enormous personal growth opportunities. At times of loss, I have not always been able to see this as such, nor could I sense any appreciation of it. I still dread loss – ***"No, not another life experience!"*** But when I again face loss, as I know I must, it is my hope that I will be able to carry it with dignity and pride. I hope to feel pride in the risk I have knowingly taken, gratitude for the treasures I reap from it, and dignity in the courage inherent in the risk. Because of my loving relationships with my animal companions, including those I have lost, I can now trust that my strength of spirit will not allow me to be silenced, or to silence myself. I will no longer accept shame as a by-product of my losses, whatever losses they may be. In addition, I continue to be profoundly grateful for what I have learned that enables me to *"really be there"* for others who are growing through their own losses.

Katie Nurmi is one of the founders of ALLN, and is currently serving as the ALLN Vice President. She has done numerous trainings on loss, including traumatic loss, and issues specific to children. She is presently developing ALLN's resources for children and their parents & caregivers.

Want to make a difference in a life? Volunteer to train as one of our Chat Room Support staff. Contact Nancy, Chat Room Chair, at nancy@alln.org.

**ALLN WEBSITE CHANGES:
A Progress Report from Our
President**

--Nancy Rodgers

ALLN has had a busy first year. Currently, we are in the process of making changes on our web-site, which we hope to have finished within the next couple of months. We are adding several new pages to the site, which include our Corporate Spon-sors, Bibliography, Children's Page, Online Brochures and Animal Awareness pages. We are also incorporating a "drop down" system to the home-page to facilitate navigation on the site. We are updating the website monthly, adding links, as we continue to identify sites on the internet that can be helpful to our members.

New animal friends –past & present—are welcome in our ALLN Family Album. If you would like to add an animal companion to our Album, we will be happy to post it for you. Please send a scanned photo and a short tribute to susan@alln.org along with your membership request. Or, send the photo and tribute via US mail to Susan Lynch, at ALLN, P.O. Box 132, Grand Rapids, MN, 55744. Susan will scan it for you and return your photograph. (If the photo is a cherished one, you may want to consider making a copy, or sending it as Certified Mail to minimize the risk of loss in the mail.) We hope that you will continue to visit our website to see the changes we are making. If you have any comments, questions, or suggestions, please feel free to e-mail either Nancy, at

nancy@alln.org or Katie at katie@alln.org.

If you have visited a website you find very helpful, please let us know, so we can consider adding a link. As always, we are here for you! Thank you for visiting us. We are always looking for ways to actively involve new members, and encourage you to consider sharing your talents and creativity.

ANNUAL MEETING SET

By now, all ALLN members should have received a ballot for the upcoming elections. Members with e-mail were sent electronic ballots, and paper ballots went out in the mail. Please be sure to return your ballots to Susan Lynch at susan@alln.org, or at The Animal Love & Loss Network, P.O. Box 132, Grand Rapids, MN, 55744 by September 15 so that your vote is counted! The results of the election will be announced at the Annual Meeting at The Plainview Old-Bethpage Library at 8 PM on September 30th, 2002. ALL ALLN members are welcome!

We welcome submissions of articles, creative writing & art to our newsletter. If you would like to submit a piece, contact our ALLN newsletter editor at katie@alln.org.



**NEW MEMORIALS IN THE
ALLN FAMILY ALBUM**

Moishe

*To Moishe- 1/19/02,
17 yrs old*

We miss your little meows and purrs, and seeing you in your favorite places. You were so loyal to us, a king, and we loved taking care of you. Thank you for touching our lives, you were our companion, friend, and dearest child. We will never forget you our sweet Moishe...

--Love Darina and Jack

Laddie

10/91 - 2/97

Always enjoyed life to the fullest. He loved smelling all the flowers. I Miss You So Very Much!

-- Diane Newman

Kuma

2/1/93 - 8/21/01

You have taken a piece of my heart with you. 'Til we meet again my Kuma Bear

--Barbara Cook

Soo-Mai

Sweet teacher of love, without condition, as your spirit soars, you live in our hearts eternally as a reminder of the best in us.

--Nancy Sylvor