



# Angel's Gate

## Skin, Feathers and Fur

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Three days before Christmas 2006 our dog Sara had surgery. The now 14-year-old Tibetan spaniel came to live with us seven years ago after a ruptured lumbar disc paralyzed her. Around Thanksgiving time we had noticed blood in her urine. We gave her antibiotics and cranberry tablets but to no avail. Abdominal x-rays revealed a mass in her bladder. Sara's veterinarian speculated that it might be a large stone but given her recent weight loss and the growing abdominal mass, I knew those chances were slim.

After I dropped Sara off at the hospital I went shopping. I was trying to keep myself busy, doing last minute holiday chores when I got a call from my life partner, Vic. "Dr. Dougherty is on the phone. He has Sara on the operating table." I pulled my car to the side of the road. "Sara has cancer. He wants to know what to do. Should he euthanize?" he blurted. For a moment the words did not quite resonate in my head. Those dreaded words – "she has cancer", I was numb. The warm tears falling on my cold cheeks brought me back to the moment. "No, wake her up. I want her to come home," I mustered to say. I did not want her to spend her last moments on a cold operating room table. That warm December afternoon I brought Sara home to die.

### Hospice

Fortunately, today we have choices when caring for our beloved animals in their final stages of life. Recognizing peoples desire to offer their animal companions the same care and treatment that they would want for themselves, the board members of the Niskel's Hospice Foundation for Pets with the approval of American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA) wrote guidelines for 'veterinary hospice care' that were published in the *AVMA Journal* in April of 2001.

Fourteen years ago when I was caring for my first animal hospice patient I would call my veterinarian regularly and give the animals status and ask, "Does that mean it will be soon?" He replied candidly, saying, "I have never seen an animal die naturally so I do not know." At that time it was a learning process for both of us.

Anyone who has an animal companion in final stages of life prays that they (the animal) die naturally and peacefully in their sleep. But life is messy and most unpredictable. Death is celebrated, embraced and feared. The way people deal with death and dying is a





Priscilla in her quad cart. Priscilla has 'shaken puppy syndrome'.

reflection of ones upbringing, culture, religious beliefs and life experiences. No two people will experience death and dying in the same way.

To inform and educate both the public and veterinarians about pet hospice, Dr Kathryn Marocchino founded The Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets in 1996. Dr Marocchino says, "Veterinarians who are thinking of offering this new service to their clients can rest assured that not only will they be in good company, but they will be highly sought by pet lovers nationwide who are avidly beginning to embrace this compassionate option." Animal hospice care will surely be client driven.

The philosophy of hospice is the antithesis of the curative philosophy being taught in veterinary colleges today. However, more veterinarians are now offering hospice care and some have established

Ideally, animal caretakers will choose veterinary hospice care. However not all people are able to comply with the physical, spiritual and emotional demands of veterinary hospice but still want to provide compassionate caring for their animal companions. Because of this great need 'animal hospice' was born.

#### Welcome to Angel's Gate

Nestled in the comfortable North Shore of Long Island is a home. From the street it looks like every other house on the block. There is a beautiful sprawling green lawn and a 20-foot Hydrangea tree weighted with big white blooms. A long wind chime hanging there is swaying in the warm sea air echoing nature's song. Yellow tulips line the brick walkway leading to the front door. There is a primal etching of a cat hanging next to the door that symbolizes all in need are welcome, for the most part, just ordinary Long Island suburbia.



The animals have full roam of our home. 'Antonio' uses handicapped access ramp to get into bed.



Hospice worker, Marie with Priscilla. There is always time for ear scratches and belly rubs at Angel's Gate. Priscilla has 'shaken puppy syndrome' and as a result is neurologically impaired.

practices specifically devoted to this type of care. Hospice care demands that veterinary care become more compassionate and intimate.

Hospice affirms life and prepares us for death. The philosophy of hospice is to provide comfort care. Hospice recognizes dying as a natural process. People love their animal companions and should the animal be diagnosed with a terminal illness they may not be ready to euthanize them. There can be many wonderful quality days, weeks, months and even years from diagnosis till death. Both human and animal can benefit from a gentle good-bye. The veterinarian is crucial for providing comfort care and support for terminally ill animals and their families.

But this home is anything but ordinary. My name is Susan Marino and I share this unique home with my life's partner Victor LaBruna. We call our home Angel's Gate. Angel's Gate is first – a residential hospice for animals. I recognized long ago too many animals were being euthanized long before it was necessary. I want to create a place where animals could die in their time of ours. For over fourteen years our home has been a refuge for those animals with nowhere else to go.

Once inside, you receive a royal welcome, as a jumble of dogs, of all sizes, shapes and colors gather at your feet looking for your outstretched hand. Katie, a whimsical three-legged cat may jump from the foyer table to your shoulders. It is hard to keep an exact tally

but the head count has been at about two hundred now for over six years. If an animal is battered, broken, ill or dying, they seem to find their way to our door. Animals are referred to us from veterinarians, rescue groups and individuals from all over the country and overseas. Word of the care we can provide has spread. Currently Angel's Gate has animals from seventeen states, Montreal, Mexico City, Moscow and Istanbul.

Through the French doors is the main office. Most striking is the absence of furniture – human furniture that is. The perimeter of the room is lined with cots. The phone that rings constantly seems to go unnoticed by the canines lounging there. Brutus sits up shaking off the excess water from his fur after his recent hydrotherapy session in the backyard pool. Brutus arrived at Angel's Gate three years ago, the 130lb Rottweiler was quadriplegic for ten months from a C-3, C-4 herniation.

that was surgically removed last year has now come back with a vengeance.

Through another set of French doors is the Great Room. Parrots bask in their sunlit cages in front of the ceiling-to-floor windows. The felines peruse every surface in the room – the couch, the tables, and the white baby grand piano. Bali, an African Gray parrot, sings his off pitch version of Jingle Bells while beautiful Sydney, a 14-year-old pastel calico with cerebella hyperplasia and renal disease sleeps peacefully in a basket beneath his cage. At Angel's Gate contradictions live together side-by-side, naturally and harmoniously. And yes many of the animals are dying but today they are alive and our home is filled with vitality and energy. At Angel's Gate end stages of life are honored and celebrated, not feared and denied. Natures healing powers are respected and used in conjunction with modern medicine. Here the

Everyday staff and volunteers come together to have a hot lunch, to talk, to listen and to support each other.



Charlie is exhausted after his physical therapy session.

His favorite spot is on the sun-drenched cot in front of the picture window in my office. You may see his new best friends Indy and Zeppy. Both are wheelchair bound. As they race together up and down the hallway in their custom-made wheelchairs you could never imagine their difficult past. Zeppy, a little Rat Terrier, is from Ohio. He became paralyzed after he 'fell' down a flight of stairs. He never received veterinary care. Indy, a fifteen-pound mix breed, is from Indiana. He was seen tossed from a car on the freeway. Two cars hit him before a good samaritan came to his rescue. Lexi, a blind, grey poodle, sleeps on a sheepskin rug under the office desk. I brought her back from New Orleans. She is a survivor of Hurricane Katrina. Her mammary tumor

animals are as much teachers as they are patients setting forth life lessons that resonate long after they are gone.

#### From Skin to Feathers and Fur

For more than thirty-five years I have been a pediatric nurse and helped many parents say good-bye to their terminally ill children. Nursing is something I do as naturally as breathing. But for many years I was restless and discontented. When I first began my nursing career, nursing was very patient centered and I watched as the profession became increasingly more task oriented. I wanted and needed a change.

I began studying holistic alternatives and began to understand the difference between curing and healing. I

studied Tellington TTouch Training (TTouch) and animal communication. I took courses in homeopathy, essential oils and flower essences. Nursing gave me the fundamental skills that I needed to provide care for the animals in my keeping but I wanted to learn more. I returned to my local community college and became a licensed veterinary technician in 2005. Earlier that year I completed studies at the University of Tennessee and received a certification in canine rehabilitation.

My dream for Angel's Gate was to create a place where all are welcome. This is a home that is forgiving and accepting and allows for differences and imperfections. Here we know every day is precious. We celebrate life and take nothing for granted. We see the potential in every life we care for. It is not perfect but it is perfectly wonderful. I believe every animal that comes to Angel's Gate has a lesson to teach and they remain with us until

emotional and spiritual needs. We are usually up by 6:00am scrambling to get everyone out before there are any 'accidents'. We get paralyzed animals into their wheel chairs and change diapers next. Every animal's care plan is tailored to suite their needs.

Together with our staff and volunteers we clean and mop. We administer sub-q fluids, check blood sugars of our many diabetic animals, give medications, run to veterinarian appointments, bandage wounds, change diapers, and get paralyzed animals into the pool or underwater treadmill. Then we clean and mop again. Staff and volunteers gather together everyday for a hot lunch that Vic or I prepare. We feel because of the nature of our work it is essential to be together daily to talk, listen and support each other. Sharing a hot meal at lunchtime nourishes our staff, our volunteers and us. The work can be daunting at times, so we also take time



Sara the hours before her death.



Sisters, Nicole and Samantha are a wonderful asset to our Junior Volunteer Program.

they fulfill their life's mission. Here we give hospice care. Hospice care does not prolong life nor does it hasten death. It also does not pre-empt euthanasia. We will make that conscious choice if we are not able to manage an animal's pain or if their quality of life is no longer there. We honor the values and dignity and uniqueness of each animal. Angel's Gate provides palliative or comfort care, which allows animals to live fully, comfortably until they take their final breath.

The days here are long and no two days at Angel's Gate are ever the same. There is a gentle rhythm at Angel's Gate, as we run on a different timetable than the rest of the world. Our days are governed by the individual demands of each animal, honoring their physical,

for ear scratches and belly rubs or a game of fetch or a swim in the backyard heated pool. And should an animal be in their final hours we sit vigil at their side until they take their final breath.

I do not believe in cages or crates, with the exception of our exotics or the occasional animals that need temporarily to be quarantined because of illness. The animals have full range of their home. They sleep in our beds, they march across the kitchen counters and tables, and they romp and play in the spacious backyard. Many of the animals have incurable diseases. And yes, many of them are dying, but today they are alive. Our mission is to allow them to live whatever time they have left in peace and with joy. And when that day comes that they

must leave we are there to support their transition. These animals have taught me a valuable life lesson I want others to understand: that every life, no matter how shattered or limited, is worthwhile.

#### Rehabilitation

In addition to hospice we also have an extensive rehabilitation program for animals. We have seen the value of physical therapy for many years. Animals frequently suffer from neurological and orthopedic conditions, which can leave them with decreased mobility and limited ability to perform normal activities. We are also caring for many dogs and cats that are paralyzed. Regardless of being treated either surgically or conservatively, physical therapy is an integral part of the healing process. Often rehabilitation can be the difference between success and failure. Many of the animals at Angel's Gate have chronic problems such as osteoarthritis

#### Education

We are committed to community service and education. Sampson, our three-year-old Boxer pup has been a working dog since he was 8 weeks old. Sampson is an animal with dwarfism. He also has angular deformities of all his limbs. Tom-Tom, the cat, looks like a feline pretzel. He sustained severe orthopedic injuries when he was hit by a car and did not receive veterinary care. The multiple fractures of his legs and tail are 'frozen' into bizarre positions. Pippin a two-year-old, three pound, Chihuahua was born with a neurological disorder. He occasionally has seizures and is unable to walk. These are just a few of the special animals at our Hospice who have a very important job to do – educating our children. In spite of their physical challenges, or perhaps because of them, Sampson, Pippin and Tom-Tom touch the heartstrings of all they meet.

Volunteer, 14-year-old Kim Moran, comforts Angel in the moments before her death.



Penny was accidentally dropped on her head as a puppy.

or hip dysplasia. An afternoon swim in the outdoor heated pool or a walk on our underwater treadmill soothes the pain and stiffness from these maladies.

We use a team approach incorporating a variety of holistic treatments. I have found that by integrating holistic and allopathic medicine we can shorten healing time and enhance the health and wellness of our animals. Vibrational medicine is limited in this very mainstream field. We do however employ acupuncture and chiropractic. In our rehabilitation program we also use, aquatic therapy, underwater treadmill, and electrical muscle stimulation, ultra sound and cold laser. Each animal's therapeutic care plan reflects the animal's individual need.

These very special animals team up with young humane educators and go into the classroom to teach students and teachers about showing kindness and respect for all animals. *The Reverence for All Life Program* has been in full swing at Angel's Gate for over five years. The animals on the team are residents at the hospice and the young humane educators are weekly volunteers. The program is successful on many different levels. It educates children how to be responsible guardians and caretakers. It also teaches young volunteers to be leaders, educators and public speakers. But most important of all it allows the animals to share their infinite wisdom and leave children with lessons that last a lifetime. ▶