

Careers

Even challenging events can result in something positive

Based on her own life experiences, vet **Belinda Johnston** set up Our Special Friends, a charity that promotes and supports the bond between people and their pets.

MY mother died when I was 10 and the companionship of our family pets was vital in helping me with my grief. Much later, during my second year at Cambridge Vet School, an advert saying 'mongrel pup wanting good home' caught my eye and, without any forward planning (not to be recommended), I adopted her.

Tasha was with me for the next 13 years; she was my constant friend and support through the most difficult of times, including when my father took his life shortly before I qualified. While my emotions were in turmoil, she enabled me to continue to engage with the people and communities around me every day. Our relationship was precious.

Once qualified, I worked in a small animal practice in London and co-owned a thriving clinic in Wandsworth, until I married an equine vet working in Newmarket and moved to Suffolk.

At the time, the practice role I was seeking – 100 per cent small animal and with an enthusiasm for a 'person-centred approach' – was elusive so, instead, I joined an image analysis company in Cambridge as a medical and veterinary consultant.

This involved meeting specialists and translating their work to help the information technology team create effective imaging software.

VET RECORD CAREERS

Vet Record Careers aims to reflect the diverse range of career opportunities available to vets and related professionals.

Your suggestions for articles are welcome. Please send them to vet.careers@bmj.com

Growing interest in bereavement support

At the time, I was also developing a strong interest in supporting end-of-life care and I trained in bereavement support and counselling with Cruse Bereavement Care.

Ironically, when the imaging company had a cash flow crisis I was made redundant and my training was useful in helping me come to terms with the loss of my job.

For a few years, I used my veterinary knowledge in roles that would fit around my young family, while continuing to develop my interest in companion animal bereavement.

After studying person-centred counselling skills, I started running regular workshops for veterinary professionals, teaching them ways of supporting clients in their grief around the loss of a companion animal. In addition, I volunteered for the Samaritans and joined the Pet Bereavement Befriender Service – now called the Pet Bereavement Support Service and run by Blue Cross.

I still lecture on pet bereavement and offer advice, training and support through talks and workshops to the veterinary and animal welfare professionals on coping with companion animal end-of-life decisions and loss. I am an active member of the Society of Companion Animal Studies (SCAS) and helped to develop its Code of Practice for Animal-Assisted Interventions.

Human-animal bond

In 2012, I launched Our Special Friends, a registered charity that promotes the benefits of animal



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Too few human-focused organisations understand the importance of the human-companion animal bond

companionship to improve health and wellbeing, and reduce social isolation and vulnerability.

We work closely with health and social care providers, but excellent as they are, few of them currently understand the importance of the human-companion animal bond or are equipped to sustain these often long-term, vital relationships. I firmly believe we are the missing piece of the jigsaw.

Recently, we helped a 95-year-old woman who had lost her dog. We sourced a new, age-appropriate dog for her and later received a note from her saying that her new companion gave her a reason to get up in the morning. She said she'd been lonely since she'd lost her previous dog and was now meeting new people and enjoying life again.

Often working in partnership with colleagues in human health or social care, Our Special Friends

helps people who are vulnerable – perhaps through age, illness or other life events – to keep their companion animals with them for as long as possible. We do this in a variety of ways; for instance, by providing practical support such as dog walking, or offering advice on other types of support needed to keep a pet at home.

If it becomes impossible for a pet to remain, we help to rehome the animal and provide emotional support to their owner. In this type of situation, planning ahead helps to avoid a crisis. Equally, if a pet is coming to the end of its life, we encourage advance planning and provide support through the process of bereavement. Sometimes we can help source other forms of animal contact for the client – such as a regular visit from one of our volunteers with their own dog.

The feedback we receive from our clients, from their families and from our partners in human and social care shows the huge value they place on the support and practical help we offer them and, in my view, confirms a growing demand for the services we offer.

In addition to helping our clients, I am heavily involved in educating veterinary professionals, human health professionals and volunteers in the fields of social care, human and animal health about the benefits of supporting human-animal relationships.

Next steps

Talking to the housing community is the next priority. The housing sector must come up with solutions to ensure that pet owners are not forced into making an impossible decision – choosing between their companion animal and suitable accommodation.



Belinda and Rolo visit a dementia day centre, where Dorothy especially enjoys the companionship of a dog

This topic is the subject of this year's SCAS conference (see box below).

Our Special Friends is still a small charity, operating in one part of Suffolk, and is hugely reliant on our volunteers. Funding is a continual struggle, but we are grateful for the help of our supporters, including Purina and the Petplan Charitable Trust. We intend to expand our service as funding permits.

Practical advice

I've gone through some difficult experiences during my career, but I've learned that even the most challenging events can result in something positive.

Don't struggle on your own and remember that, whatever difficulties you face, help and support is available.

I've also learnt to be open minded and flexible about opportunities that present themselves. Losing my job at the imaging company was traumatic,

but it set me firmly on the path to the work I do today.

Communications skills are vital. People remember how you make them feel. Learn compassionate and clear communication skills and practise them. Active listening skills ensure we have better relationships at work and at play.

And, finally, look after yourself. Find out what works for you and identify what you need to keep you in balance. Pressure will increase your performance, but too much will tip you into stress and panic, so learn how to moderate it. And find meaningful things that make you happy.

- Our Special Friends is a charity that enhances human wellbeing through animal companionship. More information is available at www.ourspecialfriends.org, e-mail: info@ourspecialfriends.org



Whatever difficulties you face, there is help and support available

CONFERENCE

Pets in housing: promoting health and wellbeing

The Society for Companion Animal Studies is holding a one-day conference presenting research into how the human-animal bond promotes health and wellbeing and discuss this issue in relation to housing. The aim of the day is to 'explore, debate and capture actions to help focus attention and drive solutions to ensure pet owners are not forced into making an impossible decision: choosing a pet or choosing accommodation'.

The conference will be held on 17 March, 2018, at the College of Animal Welfare, Headland House, London Road, Godmanchester, Huntingdon PE29 2BQ. Further details are available at www.scas.org.uk/scas-conference-2018/