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Respecting the owner-pet bond

NCSU seeks to innovate with veterinary chaplain

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As a volunteer chaplain at Rex Hospital for several years, Robert Gierka had a calling to offer care and compassion to those in grief.

Now he wants to extend that empathy to people saddened by the loss of their pets.

Gierka, 49, aims to be a full-time pet chaplain, and he has the support of leaders at N.C. State University's College of Veterinary Medicine.

"A lot of pet owners view their dogs and cats as members of the family," said Michael Davidson, director of veterinary medical services at the school. "If they lose a pet, it has the same sort of emotional impact as losing a child or a spouse. We need to recognize that."

Davidson said he is working with Gierka to try to secure private grant money to pay for a full-time pet chaplain as part of the vet school's faculty -- a novel idea in veterinary training. The chaplain could serve clients who bring their sick pets for treatment, and teach students how to deal with anxious owners.

To Gierka, a publications manager at NCSU, the role of pet chaplain is needed in a society that has not yet accepted the human-animal bond as a valid relationship, which is often felt most acutely in death.

"People say, 'Get over it.' But people are struggling," said Gierka. "There's no easy way to get over it."

The soft-spoken chaplain sees his role as a grief consultant, ready to offer a compassionate ear to people struggling with the loss of a pet. Already, Gierka is being called on to offer guidance in some of N.C. State's veterinary courses. This semester, he will work with a professor who is teaching her students how to help pet owners decide to euthanize a terminally ill animal.

The idea of pet chaplaincy came to Gierka six years ago when a friend called to tell him about an experience at a church picnic. The woman had taken her two dogs to the event, only to be chided by her pastor.

"But this is a family picnic," Gierka's friend told her pastor. "This is my family."

In listening and offering comfort to his friend, Gierka realized he was, in effect, serving as a pet chaplain. So he investigated to see whether there was such a thing. He eventually set up a Web page (www.petchaplain.com), and bought an embossing stamp with the title. In his Bible, he



Chaplain Rob Gierka comforts Anne Dewar, left, and Nancy Caison, whose dachshund was being examined at NCSU's veterinary hospital.


Staff Photo by Travis Long

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stamped "pet chaplain" on the page meant to record "births."

"It's a midwifery process," he said, referring to the pioneering of a new field.

Growing up in upstate New York, Gierka had 14 cats, a few dogs and rabbits at one point. He currently has no pets.

His approach to chaplaincy is inter-faith. Reared a Roman Catholic, Gierka is now a member of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh. He said he's careful not to impose any religious view on the pet owners he counsels, but to bring in spiritual elements if they so desire.

Last year, for example, his friend Pam Carpenter lost her cocker spaniel, Niki. Gierka offered to conduct a memorial service, playing classical guitar pieces and reciting spiritual prayers. He encouraged Carpenter and her husband to share memories of Niki.

Carpenter said the experience helped her get over the loss, unlike her experience 13 years earlier with a cocker spaniel named Paige. The Carpenters had rushed Paige to the vet school's animal hospital after the dog mysteriously started hemorrhaging. She died on the operating table.

"There was absolutely no one around who understood what we were going through," Carpenter said. "I went into a depression."

But pet chaplaincy made Niki's passing a little more bearable, she said.

"This is such an important service to offer to validate the experience you're having."

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