

Quality Care at the End of Life

— It's What We All Want —



By Lorraine May, M.A.

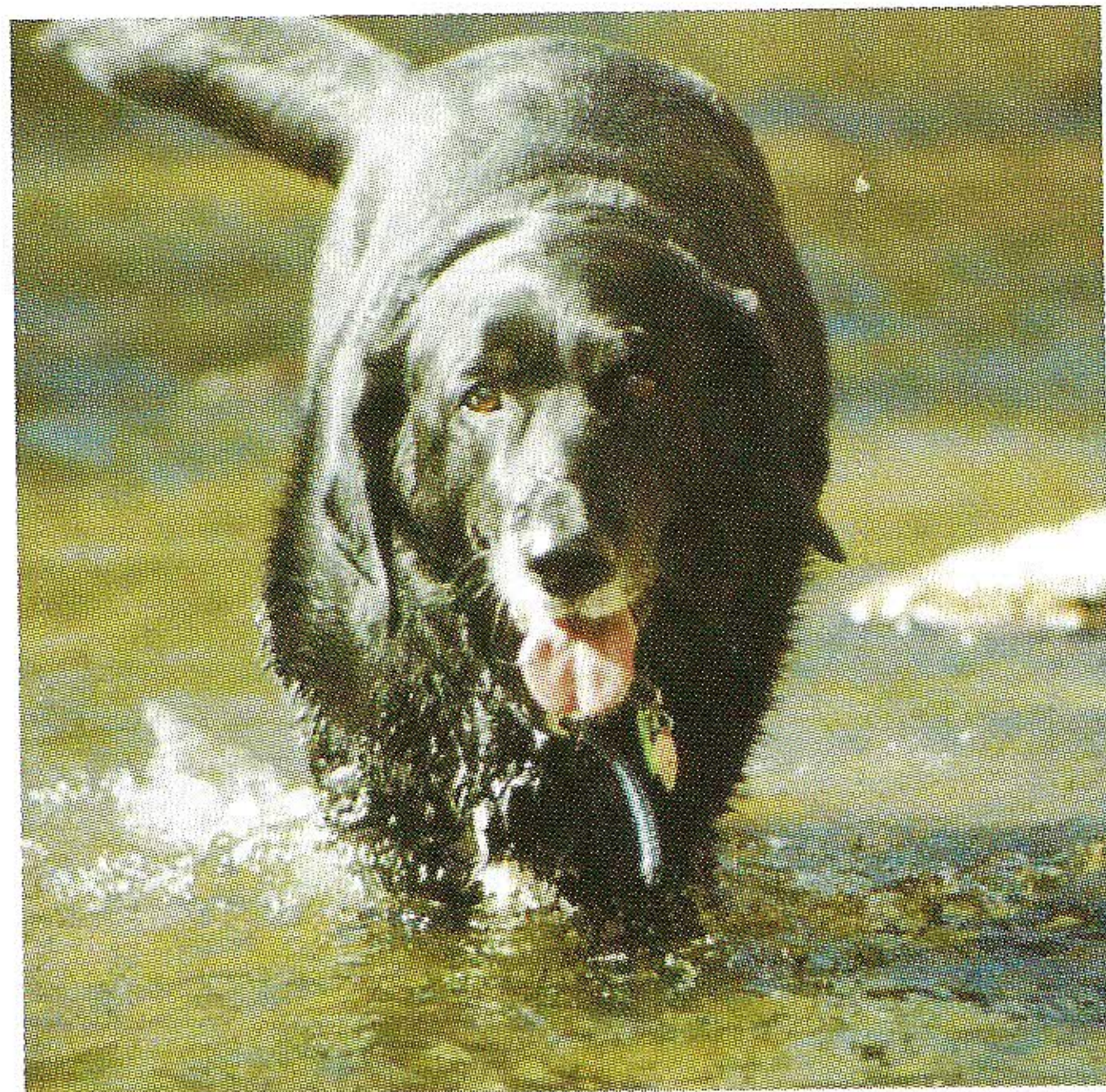
Founder, Misha May Foundation

When we bring a new dog into our home, the last thing we want to have to think about is his inevitable passing, but we must prepare for the end so that our friend will have the best quality of life possible. End-of-life care for our dog, including being present for the euthanasia if necessary, can be the greatest gift we give him. Not surprisingly, this sacred act of love benefits us as well. Ann, who lost two dogs this year, shares, "One of the rewards is feeling you can give your dog a fraction of the love and support he has shown to you."

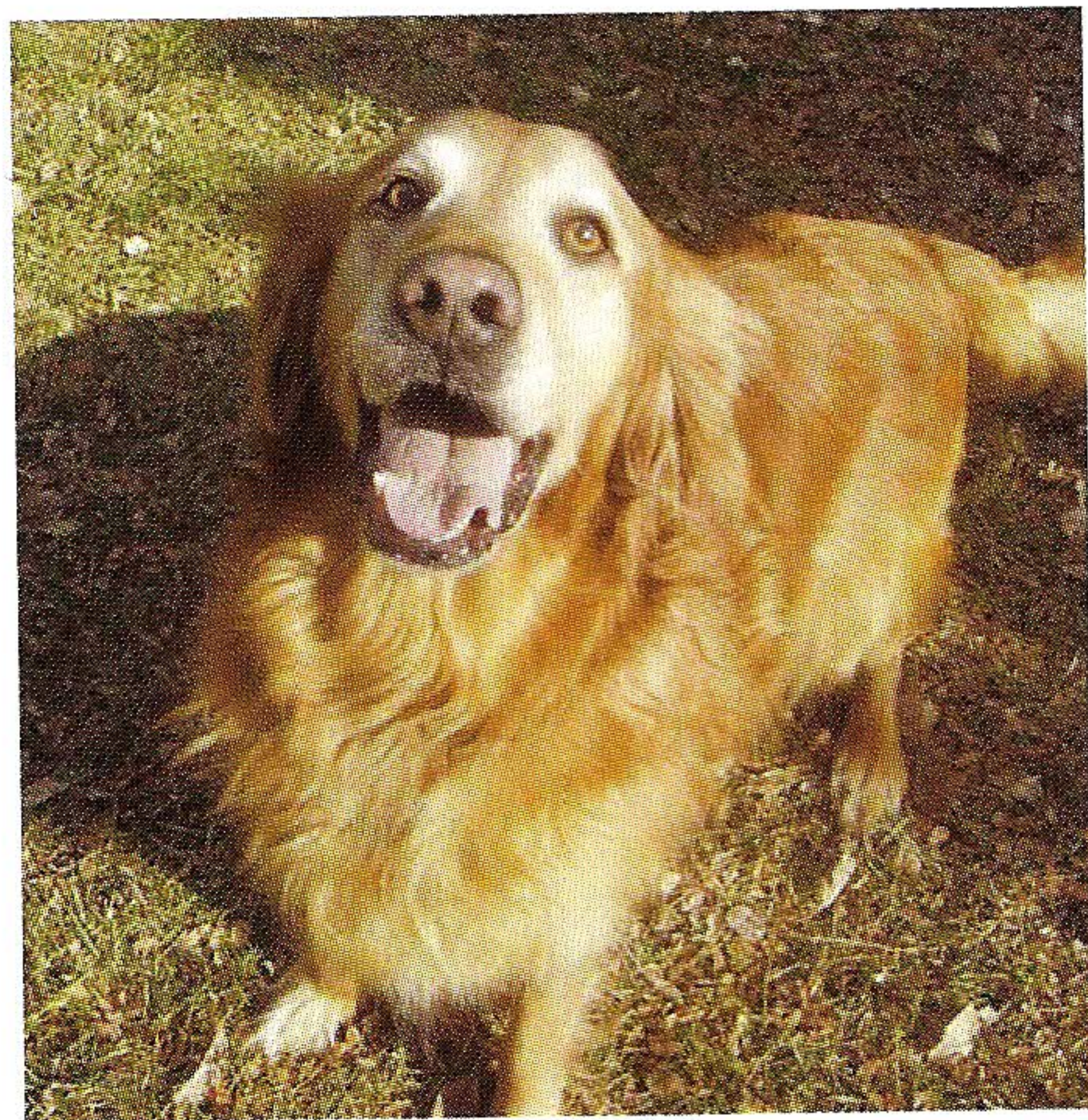
Our grief is a testament to what is best about us as humans—our capacity to love and be loved. I hope this article lends support to those of you who are grieving or facing difficult decisions. If you are ambivalent regarding your role, I present these convincing heartfelt testimonies.

Journey's End with Misha & Zeb

I had the privilege of accompanying my dogs Misha and Zeb to the end of their journeys. The end-of-life care I provided was the natural culmination of a lifetime of mutual trust and love. Being there for them and with them made me a more compassionate, stronger and wiser person. Knowing that each moment could be their last invited an exceptional appreciation for the richness they brought into my life.

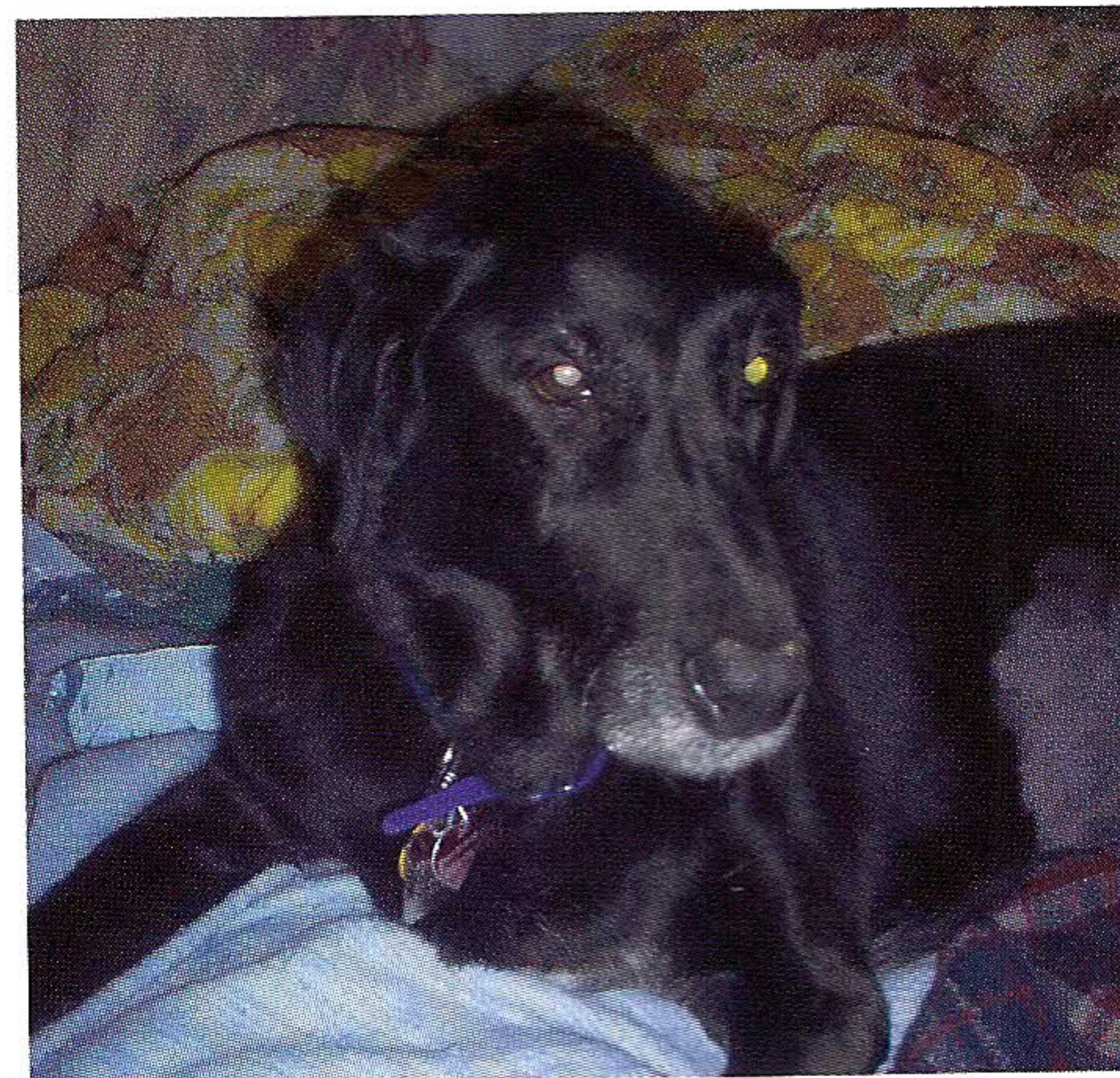


Misha (above), rescued on her way to a shelter, passed away in 2000 at 16½ years. Her legacy, The Misha May Foundation, is a non-profit dog rescue created to help homeless dogs like her. Misha outlived her 30 day prognosis by nine months. Two months before she died, we were hiking and swimming in Alaska! Misha demonstrated daily that until death came she wanted us to celebrate each moment.



Zeb (above) passed away within a few months of his cancer diagnosis at 11 years of age. Always the perfect gentleman, he faced his end with grace. Zeb and I worked together rehabilitating numerous rescued Misha May dogs. We were a team and I still miss him. Although I was helpless to prolong his life, I was grateful I could ease his transition.

The following are some intimate portraits of caregivers and their beloveds.



Bella (above), a sweet quirky "chow hound," became uncharacteristically companionable in the remaining three weeks following her cancer diagnosis.

Robert: "I saw Bella's personality change as her way of saying that she appreciated me. This time was very special for us. She passed away peacefully at home. I accepted my sweet sorrow as a gift—the gift of keeping an open heart."



Rocky (above), relinquished to a shelter at an elderly age, was sad, confused and deteriorating very quickly in the shelter.

Doug: "It is emotionally very hard to know that a dog will be with you for only a short time, but it is very gratifying to know that you are making his twilight years the best ones of his life."

Sydney (top of next page), always sweet and shy, ultimately lost interest in the things he had previously loved.

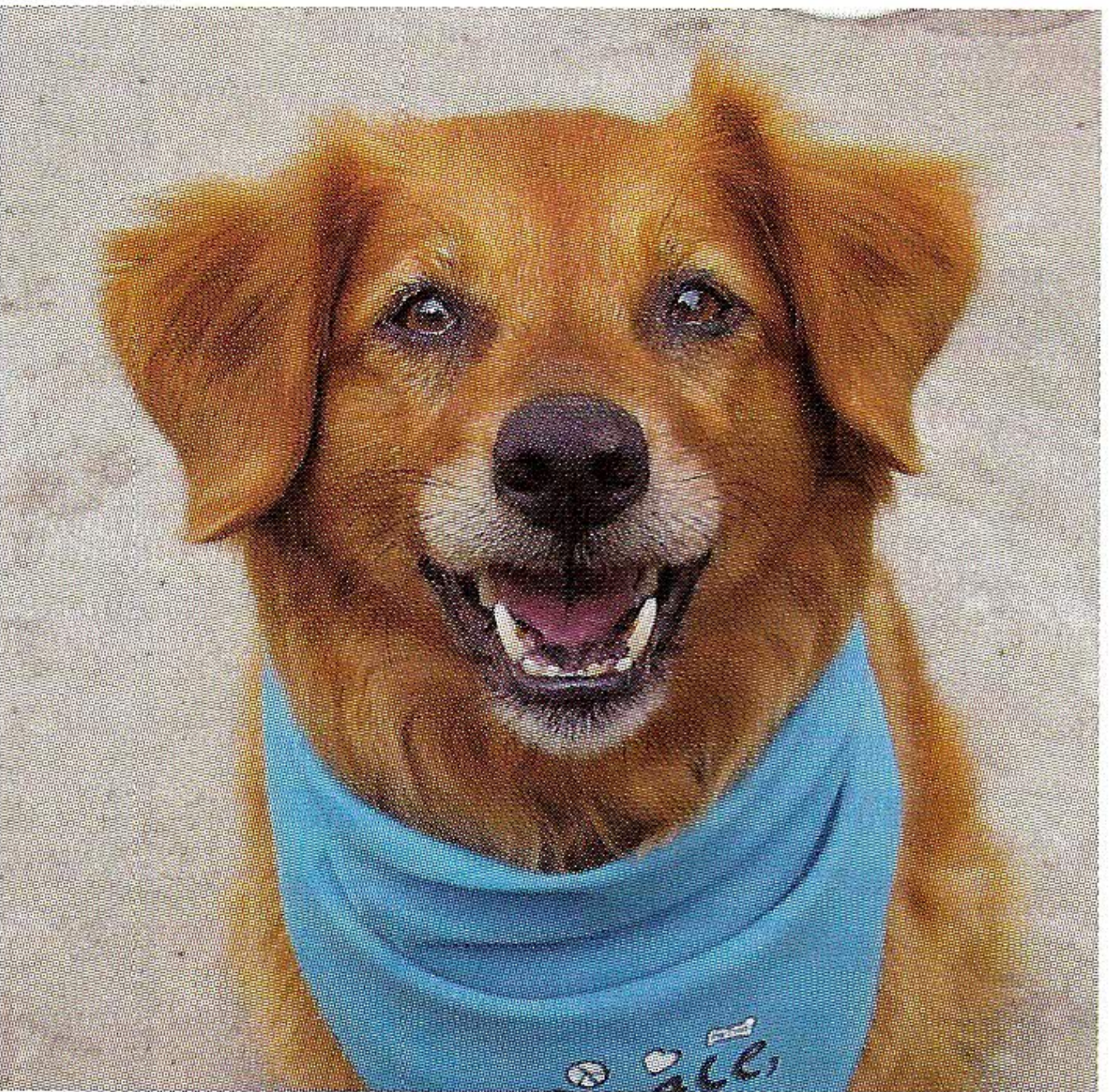


Ann: "It's very sad to watch your once playful, active dog suddenly become old, sick and have difficulty getting around. We exhausted the medical possibilities and it became time to say goodbye."



Dodger, (above) our protector from puppyhood, became immobile at 14 years of age due to an untreatable nerve disease.

Barbi: "It was so hard to lose him so quickly, but I'm glad we kept him with us. It was an honor to care for him for his final five weeks."



Gabe (above), who was patient with whatever came his way, lived to be nearly 16. His condition was never definitively diagnosed.

Barbara: "It was bittersweet to live the final days of Gabe's life. I was on pins and needles, always hoping he would get better. I can't imagine not seeing him through to the end of his days. As difficult as it all was, the last day was the hardest. I had imagined us relaxing together in the summer grass where I planned to tell him how much I treasured him. Instead, he needed me to let him go."



Gracie (above), who passed away at age 10 due to degenerative spinal arthritis, spent four spirited years with her adopters.

Terry: "We would have never given up Gracie no matter how bad it got. What I learned is that caring for an animal at the end is a humbling process because it puts life in perspective. It's a blessing to know they are at peace with you, the person they trusted most in their lives."

As I conclude this article, my thoughts turn to two lovely labs in my care. Tara, age 12, requires further diagnostics following irregular blood work. Lola, my 7-year-old foster, has already out-lived the expectations for her condition. They both face these uncertainties with tranquil acceptance. They are my teachers and I am still learning.

Despite the financial, medical, emotional and logistical challenges, every person interviewed, without exception, was honored to have provided their friend with end-of-life care. Terry reflected on her caregiving experience, "As time goes by, you can remember your loving pet with fondness rather than pain. Wouldn't you want your last days to be with the people or animals you love?"

End-of-Life Resources for Pets

Palliative and hospice care can mean a better and more comfortable ending for your pet. Palliative care focuses on managing the pain, lack of appetite, fatigue, nausea and or other symptoms your pet may be experiencing

from a chronic disease or its treatment. Hospice care, too, looks first to the comfort of the pet—those with a terminal diagnosis and for whom a cure is no longer possible.

Pain management, in particular, is a science that is rapidly evolving. Sometimes just a few small changes in medication can return a pet to being more like his old self. It may still be an animal with a fatal disease, but that extra time can be very meaningful.

As the End Approaches

As you near the final days with your furry friend, spend as much quality time as you can with him. Here are some ideas to make the most of this special time and help you cherish the memories of your time together when he is gone:

- Spend time with your pet
- Photograph and videotape him
- Create positive memories
- Do favorite activities
- Create an end-of-life plan
- Let go of guilt and regret; be present

Important Resources

It's important to know that there are resources available to help you through this time with your pet. Don't hesitate to seek help and comfort from your veterinarian and other professionals, friends who have been there, people who know your dog and grief support groups.

Pet Trusts

Did you know that Colorado law allows you to create a Pet Trust to care for your dog if you predecease him? There are several attorneys in the Denver area that specialize in pet trusts and can help you arrange for your dog's care once you are gone.

Lorraine May founded the Misha May Foundation animal rescue in 2001 in memory of her dog Misha who had passed away from cancer. She is the Executive Director and Head Trainer with extensive experience in dealing with extreme separation anxiety issues in dogs. For additional information, please visit Lorraine's website www.mishamayfoundation.org.

