

pet cemetery

FOR THREE DECADES, THE SHUGARTS HAVE HELPED ATLANTANS COPE WITH THE LOSS OF THEIR LOVED ONES. BY JUSTIN HECKERT

Frankly, it's because they were family. It's because they were small and we took them home, a wet nose with white-brown fur folded at the foot of the bed. It's because they were *friends*—and each day at the other side of the door the sound of their scratching paws was a song to welcome us home. They were a set of drooping eyes and a pink lolling tongue, and we let them out on warm days to run for hours in yard-shaped spots of sun. We named them, we fed them, and in turn, our gift was their love.

That's why we bury our pets. That's why, when their time has come and we are faced with the impossibility of their passing, we treat them not as animals but instead as though they were human. For a pet person, the heart has a tough time distinguishing flesh from fur.

Doyle Shugart understands. Working as a funeral director and embalmer at Atlanta's prestigious H.M. Patterson & Son Funeral Home in 1972, he noticed people always inquired if they offered *pet* burial services, which they did not. In fact, he knew of no one who did. So Shugart (who grew up with a little dachshund named Heidi and a mutt named Tangles and who had grieved over their deaths as if they had been relatives) started a business with his wife, Maudann—an after-work operation that tended to the burial and memorializing of animals.

Their first client was an elderly woman who lived in a large house by herself in the city. She called and asked Shugart to pick out the "finest casket" he could find for her English bulldog. He complied, and one evening she held an open viewing with her friends in front of her fireplace. A party of finely dressed people met and said their goodbyes to the dog over hors d'oeuvres. The woman's gardener dug a small hole near the kitchen window, and Shugart erected a granite monument there the next day.

Word of mouth spread, and then there were more. There were dogs and there were cats and on some days there were hamsters, and he carried them carefully out of their homes in small baskets covered in blankets, and he did it because of love.

"They were family—that's how much they meant to people," he says. "But the [owners] had a place to go now. A place where they knew their loved ones would be taken care of."

That's how **Deceased Pet Care**—the best pet cemetery and crematory service the state of Georgia has to offer and the one chosen to cremate the body of Zoo Atlanta's beloved Willie B.—was born. Today, Shugart's children, **Keith, Kyle**



Oak Rest Pet Gardens in Bethlehem, off Highway 316

and **Donna**, who grew up amid a swarm of pets of their own, help manage the office in Chamblee, the small **Loving Care** pet cemetery in Douglasville and **Oak Rest Pet Gardens**, a 10-acre hill in Bethlehem lined with Leyland cypress trees that serves as a quiet resting spot for thousands of pets and the remains of pets.

There's Brutus and Gizmo and Molly and Smokey and Yabu, who was "a good buddy," and down the green hill in the low breeze lies Frosty, and Duke, whose headstone pleads, "Lord, I give you my best friend—take care of him." Shiro was a dog that "we will love and miss forever." There's even the grave of a man who chose to be buried next to his pets, Paxton, Jed, Spaghetti, Brandy, Ginny and Bonnie. There are more than 3,000 and room for a hundred thousand more: cats and seeing-eye dogs and police dogs and pigs and horses and birds and goldfish. It's a good place—poplars and birches with long shadows like fingers touching the ground.

A place for family. ☺

The office of **Deceased Pet Care** is located at 4991 Peachtree Road, Chamblee, (770) 457-7659.