



All Creatures Great and Small

Andrew Mazan, pet funeral director at Baltimore Humane Society

By Nicole Ogrysko

"I did community-service hours at this funeral home in high school, and I enjoyed the satisfaction of helping grieving families. My first semester of college, I got diagnosed with stage-three cancer that spread to my stomach, lungs, and abdomen. A lot of my friends didn't know how to deal with the situation. When we would go out to eat, you didn't see a lot of kids with cancer who had lost their hair, and I felt awkward. I went through a year and a half of chemotherapy and stem-cell transplants and surgeries. I've been in remission for, like, almost four years now.

In January, I applied for a job here, working in the kennel. I like the fact that it's giving the animals a second chance, because a lot of them have been abandoned. I was given a second chance at life when I got cancer.

The cemetery director at the time, she had left, and I applied for the position because I knew stuff about this field, having worked in funeral homes.

I actually dig the graves myself and prepare the animals. Since we're a 'no-kill' shelter, the cemetery is open to anybody who wants to bury their animal here. There are pets here dating back to the '30s and '40s. The founder of this place, Ms. Barton, fostered a couple of different rare animals. There's an elephant from Ringling Bros. buried in the cemetery, there's a bear, and, I think, a couple of horses.

We don't embalm pets so the only prep work involved is cosmetic and basic washing. I try to make them look at peace. I wash the hair and comb it back, close the mouth and the eyes. We don't have a crematory here on the property but go through one in Pennsylvania that picks up animals twice a week and drops off the remains for people who can either take them home or bury them in the

cemetery. I usually do somewhere between three and five burials a week. We have casket options, headstones, and we get all of that ordered. When they come out to the burial, we have a viewing room, and sometimes they want an open casket to see their pet one more time and put some toys in the casket. Usually, there are a couple family members and friends who knew that pet. It's rarely just one person.

It's interesting sometimes to see how much pets affect people's lives. I always realized that people love their pets, but until I started working here, I never knew the level that it was on. It's hard sometimes emotionally, but I'm usually able to hold it together because it's not really about me, it's just about helping them.

Usually it's dogs, cats, stuff like that. There was one particular person who came in with a snake. I'm generally terrified of snakes, so it was kind of hard for me to do that. Apparently, she had this snake for 30-plus years. I never really expected anyone to have a relationship with a snake, but seeing how much this snake could affect her really opened my mind to see there's such a wider connection with man and animal than I could ever fathom.

I got a call from a gentleman who was on

vacation, and his neighbors were checking in on these dogs. They were two older dogs. So, he calls me up and says, 'My neighbor has notified me that one of my pets has passed away in the creek behind my house.' So I go down to the house, and it's an older Lab, and the guy had left his dogs outside. It was 100-degree weather and he just had a bucket of water for them. I look over at the creek and I see the dog. So I go down and am about to pick up this dog, and she picks her head up. Immediately, I flipped out. I didn't know what to do. I tried to call this guy, and he wasn't picking up his phone. After calling him a couple of times, I had to pick her up and carry her up the hill because one of her back legs was broken.

I ended up calling Animal Control and getting ahold of the neighbor. Eventually, we got ahold of the owner and were able to get the dog to a vet. They ended up doing surgery, and she's still living. That was the first time I cried at this job.

I've never worked anywhere else that I've enjoyed this much. I always thought that everybody was separate in the world, but once I started working with animals, it's kind of given me this perspective that we're all connected. It's nice to be able to have that kind of relationship with something that's not a human being. People are harder to work with than animals, because they have all these different personalities. When your objective for the day is to help an animal, all the different personalities don't matter because we all do it for the animals. That's something that not many people get to experience. I wish they would." ■