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10-9-2013

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STARS Citation

Preston-Sidler, Leandra (2013). The overlooked victims of domestic-violence cases: pets. UCF Today, 2013-10-09. Retrieved from <https://today.ucf.edu/the-overlooked-victims-in-domestic-violence-situations-pets/>

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The Overlooked Victims of Domestic-Violence Cases: Pets

By Leandra Preston-Sidler
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, October 9, 2013

Many of us consider pets as family members. Some refer to pets as “children” and treat them as such. I am guilty of the latter and will do anything for my dogs, including spending too much money on their needs, letting them sleep in our bed (pillows included) and generally spoiling them rotten.

I don’t just love my dogs, I am slightly obsessed with them. If you have four legs, you can easily weasel your way into my heart. It’s not as easy to do if you have two legs; I tend to like people, too, but I’m just a little more suspicious of them.

Believing that pets are family members with just as much right to love and safety as humans is part of the reason a few years ago I established Animal Safehouse of Brevard, a nonprofit organization that provides foster care to pets of women seeking shelter from domestic violence. Unless one has been in such a situation, what happens to pets in these cases has probably never been a consideration for you.

I came across the idea reading an article in *People* magazine in 2007 about a woman in California who started such a program in conjunction with the Humane Society in Rancho Coastal. I had long been an animal lover and an activist against domestic violence, and realized that if I had never thought about the connection, most other folks probably hadn’t either.

I contacted local domestic-violence shelters to see if they took pets or if programs were in place to care for pets while women were in shelter, but found that there were no resources for four-legged victims of family violence. Some people are fortunate enough

to have family and friends who would assist them in such a situation but one of the common features of domestic violence is isolation; often the very circumstances that enable such violence to reach a point where a woman needs shelter are the same that mean there is nowhere for her pets to go.

Domestic violence is complex, largely gender-based, rooted in power and control, and what some of us may think about “just leaving,” it is not so simple. In addition to economic, practical, and psychological considerations, what to do with a pet is another piece of the equation.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, more than 50 percent of women seeking shelter reported they had left their pet with their batterer and [71 percent](#) of pet owners entering domestic-violence shelters report that their batterer had threatened, injured or killed family pets. The relationship between human and animal violence is well established and in domestic violence situations pets may be used as tools of control and abuse, particularly after the victim flees. Safe havens serve dual purposes: They remove a barrier that keeps women in domestic-violence situations and they provide safety for animals when women leave home.

A quote by Mahatma Gandhi, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated,” speaks to the intersection of the treatment of all members of a society, humans and animals alike.

As a meat-eating society, our relationship with animals is fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies.

Many view dogs and cats differently than cows or pigs: “Domestic” animals are family members while farm animals are food. This tension often leads to poor treatment of animals in domestic situations. Some consider animals family members while others consider them disposable or less than worthy of fair and just treatment.

I see it often. Some animals that are taken in are abused, others may be well treated but later abandoned.

Such is the state of the world that some dogs sleep on pillows while others are abused or slaughtered. Unfortunately, the same goes for the treatment of humans.

Domestic violence is a complex problem with many roots, but thankfully resources are improving. For those in Central Florida, seeking safety from domestic violence for both women and pets can be a phone call away, as Harbor House Domestic Violence Shelter in Orlando now has a kennel for pets as part of its domestic-violence housing.

There are some simple ways everyone can help, such as donating money or food to local domestic-violence shelters so they can also care for the pets of their victims, or you might even offer to foster a pet for a shelter victim.

In a perfect world, such programs would be unnecessary. Unfortunately, however, this is not a perfect world, so join me and others in trying to raise society's awareness, education and "moral progress" so that respect for all beings will become our new norm.

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