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NEWS

Red Bank Vets Establish Foundation To Pay Pets' Medical Bills Nonprofit steps in when families can't afford life-saving care

By Shanna Williams

RED BANK - Back In 2003, Dr. Anthony DeCarlo and Dr. Thomas S. Trotter from the Red Bank Veterinary Hospital came up with a way to give pet owners who were unable to pay for lifesaving treatment for their pets an option other than euthanasia.

That year, the two doctors established the Red Bank Veterinary Foundation, funding it with contributions from staff and clients.

In the beginning, the foundation served only clients of Red Bank Veterinary Hospital.

But in 2005, the founders decided the idea should expand.

The name was changed to the Save U.S. Pets Foundation because the new board of directors wanted to help pets throughout the state and, hopefully in the future, throughout the country, said Susan Lemme, the chairwoman of the foundation.

The new foundation took some time to get organized. However, they are now an official 501(c) (3) Charitable Organization and all donations are tax deductible. "We were all new to this organization, and it really was a learning experience," Lemme said.

"Our initial thought was that we were saving pets from economic euthanasia, but we found that we were saving families in some respects."

In the first year, the organization saved 18 pets from being euthanized because their owners were unable to pay for the life-saving medical treatment.

One example Lemme gave was an elderly woman who traveled 60 miles each way to get chemotherapy and radiation for her cat that had cancer. "(The cat) was her only family," Lemme said.

A disabled veteran whose only companion was a Rottweiler was also helped through the generosity of the foundation.

Lemme said most of the clients who use the foundation are elderly and disabled. However, that is not always the case.

Another example of pet owners that were helped through Save U.S. Pets was a young family. "We had a young couple with a baby moving into their first house. The previous owner had left a box of rat poison in the closet and their dog ate it," Lemme said. With the expense of buying their first home and supporting their child, the young family could not afford the treatment to save their dog. They spent \$4,000 to try and save their dog, but it was not enough. The family applied for a grant through Save U.S. Pets and their dog was saved.

"Most of the people we help - their pets would have been euthanized for economic reasons, not health reasons," Lemme said. Like the young family who could only afford \$4,000 in medical treatment for their dog because they just purchased a new home, or the disabled veteran who could not afford the unexpected expense when his dog got ill, many pet owners are forced to euthanize animals because they cannot afford the treatment. "Conditions that were once considered fatal and devastating can be treated very successfully now. However, these medical advances come with a very high cost which pet owners do struggle to bear," Lemme said.

Lemme knows from experience how hard it is to get the news that your pet has a serious illness and how much money it can take to get the pet healthy again. She had a cat named Jack Brown. "He was like our child. Our children are grown and moved out and Jack was our child," Lemme explained. Jack developed a form of cancer and needed extensive medical treatment. "We went through an amputation of his leg, five weeks of radiation every day, chemotherapy several times, a couple more operations," and a lot of money, she said. "I thought, 'Oh my God, how lucky I am.' If I had lost Jack I would have died." Because Lemme was able to pay for the medical attention Jack needed, he lived another two years. This experience made her want to help other pet owners in similar situations with their pets that do not have the resources to pay for the needed medical treatment.

Currently, one of Lemme's cats, which she got through a cat rescue service, was affected by the recent pet food recall. She said only six days after she started feeding her new cat wet food, the recall was announced. The cat suffered renal failure and Lemme still has to give him an intravenous line every morning and feed him every two hours to get medication into his system. "And he is starting, just now, to get better." Lemme said her experiences help her to sympathize with the clients of the foundation.

"We are so glad we are there to help, and it is very, very rewarding," she said of the all-volunteer staff of Save U.S. Pets. The foundation is fund driven and is in need of donations.

The suggestion to apply for a grant from the Save U.S. Pets Foundation must come from a veterinarian. The client must first use any money that he or she can and then apply for Care Credit, a medical credit card used by the veterinary industry and the human medical industry as well. "And once they have either been denied for Care Credit or maxed it out, then they are a candidate for the Save U.S. Pets Foundation," Lemme said.

More information about the foundation, requests for a grant and information about how to donate to the foundation are available on the Web site www.saveuspets.org. Veterinarians can also go online to request to be a participating practice.

