

Services Mean No Pet Care Expense Worries for Veteran Hagemaster

THERAPET CLIENT PROFILE

Pets make life sweeter and add so much quality, especially for low-income senior citizens whose pets are family and therapy. Therapet client Ray Hagemaster adopted Shorty the Beagle about eight years ago from the Humane Society of El Paso, where he volunteered walking and playing with pets. It generated needed exercise for him and the animals.

"I was skeptical," about adopting himself at that point in life recalls the lifelong animal lover, now divorced with four grown sons. "I have family here who are helpful, but they have their own lives to live. Friends at the Humane Society said she'd be perfect for me, and they were right! We've been through a lot together. We spent almost four years in a gated community apartment in Waco caring for my mother who suffered from dementia. We survived an ice storm car accident in central Texas when an 18-wheeler knocked us 300-yards. And now we share the recent grief over the sudden death of the sweetest pit bull puppy that we rescued from dire circumstances. But that's the way it is."

The native El Pasoan spent more than six years serving in the Air Force. He retired on non-service-connected disability after many years employed with public utilities and temp agencies.

His chronic and often debilitating back condition and degenerative arthritis limit his activities, causing a 150-pound weight gain and subsequent surgery. He maintains his now consistent 200-pounds by walking four to five blocks each morning with Shorty in their Five Points central neighborhood. Their garage apartment sits above Memorial Park, where they live on a small pension and Social Security.

Ray participates with services and Bible study twice weekly at Park Hills Christian Church. He also dedicates four to five hours at a time several days a week at the Veterans Administration in Northeast. He greets visitors at the volunteer desk, hands out wheel chairs and directs vets to the different clinics while Shorty naps awaiting his return.

"I try to assist in any way I can, helping any disabled or elderly person," Ray explains, noting that Shorty won't eat or drink until he comes home. He hopes his own condition will improve with current ongoing medical treatment. "Like them, I understand firsthand that healthcare in our circumstance is a 24/7 365-day-a-year job. I have about a five-hour window and then I'm done for that day."

Ray said he knows pets are great for people, especially those with health problems and/or living alone.

"Companion animals are so important, and always ready to love you," he said, adding he's shared his life

with dogs since childhood, from Chihuahuas to German Shepherds. In past years he donated five of his shepherds to the New Mexico School for the Visually Impaired in Alamogordo for service guide training. "No matter how bad your day is or how poorly you feel, they are there, they're happy to see you and love you unconditionally."

Ray discussed the community and nationwide tragedy of so many pets subjected to cruelty and awaiting forever homes because there are too many animals and not enough good families to love them back. Rescue groups often must turn away animals due to lack of space. Most people love the cute and cuddly puppies and kittens, but many don't take the time to be responsible and train them.

"People are Earth's stewards and God's caretakers for the animals," Ray said, noting how important it is to learn to live more in harmony, which he said he often prays about with thousands and thousands of homeless and suffering animals.

"So many pets need homes because of irresponsible people who don't spay/neuter and keep them from wandering," he said. "Humans must be their pack leaders, work with them, teach them, set boundaries and limits and spend time. There's no such thing as bad dogs. It's bad people, and irresponsible people who create terrible situations for them." He said his volunteer time at the Humane Society with unwanted pets desperate for forever homes and personally witnessing animal dumping prove it.

"I do what I can and try to educate people," about responsibility, he said. With his own tight economic reality, Ray added he is grateful to Therapet's volunteers and support for helping him and his furry family member.

"I've worried about how I will meet Shorty's needs as she gets older," said Ray, who joined Therapet in January from a referral from a family member. "Her age is catching up in her double digits, but she does great! It's such a relief to know that as she ages, she'll have the medicine and veterinary care she needs, including routine things like vaccinations and good nutritional food."

Meanwhile, he said Shorty loves their yard and the cooler weather so she can take sunbaths. She patrols the property, walks with Ray and "keeps her girlish figure. She's my therapy, and my friend!"

For more information about qualifying as a Therapet client, donating to programs or volunteer driver opportunities, please call our program coordinator at (915) 581-3789.

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