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**Pet Talk**  
Sharon L. Peters

## Pet Talk: Hospice fosters offer dogs, cats a peaceful death

The old dog obviously didn't have long.

Thin and scarred-up, he'd clearly had a rough go of it for at least part of his life, and had been fending for himself for at least a little while. And now he had inoperable prostate cancer, common in dogs that, like him, haven't been neutered.



But he was cheerful and affable and seemed to take great joy from even the smallest things. The folks at MaxFund, a no-kill shelter in Denver where he'd landed, felt he had some good days yet to be lived.

So the sweet-natured lab/shepherd mix they'd named Copper went home with Tami Tanoue and Roger McKenzie.

And for two sunny months he lived the life he deserved. He settled in with the couple's other pets, adapting quickly to the various rhythms and routines of the household. His big tail was a constant-motion metronome, thrubbing against the wall whenever a human approached, flinging everything at big-dog height to the nether reaches of the room (his nickname became Slappy because of all that tail action). He took long walks around the neighborhood and snacked on grilled steak.

And then Copper died.

It was pretty much the same story with Missy, the emaciated old Pomeranian mix found in someone's window well. She was deaf and nearly blind, probably from a brain tumor, but she took great comfort in being wrapped in a blanket and held on a lap, so Tanoue and McKenzie took her home, and that's what they gave her for the final weeks of her life.

And then there was Roger the cat, dumped with a vet when he was 14 after he'd been missing the litter box. Turns out he had cancer. He lived his final five weeks with the couple, well-fed and taking long naps in the sunshine.

The couple are among a devoted corps of MaxFund "hospice fosters," about 15 in all, who provide end-of-life love and care to terminally ill animals ditched by their owners.

Only a tiny fraction of the nation's shelters have such programs. The meds and care such animals need to stay content and pain-free cost plenty. And there are millions of healthy animals requiring shelters' attention. Moreover, hospice fostering isn't the kind of work every volunteer feels able to take on. It's tough enough to foster a litter of puppies, becoming attached, knowing they'll be gone soon. But hospice fosters know there will be no happy-ending adoption to mark the end of their time with an animal.

"Your consolation when you lose him," says Tanoue, "is you gave him the best you could."

The pain of loss is not insignificant — she still gets a little teary when speaking of Copper, a dog she knew for only a few weeks before he died more than two years ago. But "the opportunity to get to know another animal, even if only for a little while, is a wonderful gift," she says.

And there's the truth that helps such people through the sad moments: That old dog or cat was not scared or alone. Whatever else had happened in its life up until then, including abandonment by an owner without the compassion or soul or guts to be there until the end, is erased or at least overwritten by period of love and a peaceful parting.

Tanoue, a lawyer, and her writer husband don't spend even one second thinking about the people who put their pets into the fix that resulted in their landing at the Tanoue-McKenzie home.

"When you volunteer at a shelter, it's easy to become cynical about people," she acknowledges. "But focusing on how the animal got there is unproductive."

You just do what you can to make up for the misdeeds of others.

Oddly, until just a few years ago, Tanoue had never had a pet. Not growing up; not as a young adult. She and McKenzie adopted their first — from MaxFund — in 2004, and things just progressed from there. Now their pets number four — three dogs and one cat — and they've provided temporary foster care to a dozen or so animals in need of a temporary safe haven before adoption, as well as to the three terminally ill animals.

Tanoue shrugs off comments about the selflessness it must take to gird oneself so a dog or cat can live its final days in peace. "There are so many wonderful volunteers who do so very much," she says.

Yes, that is true. And the very notion of categorizing the various aspects of animal volunteerism into some sort of hierarchical ladder of greater or lesser contributions is horrid. Still, when you think about a dog like Copper, who but for the grace of an extraordinary couple would have spent his final hours alone and confused in a strange place, well, it seems a little like there are angels here on earth.

Copper got a final summer of happiness. He took long walks, ate boiled chicken and lay on Tanoue's feet every night while the rest of the pets clustered around. When he died it was at the place he'd known as home, with the people who loved him holding his head and telling him so.

Sharon's column appears online every Wednesday at [usatoday.com](http://usatoday.com)