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LEFT: Dr. Dan Gillis and a surgical nurse in WestVet's pet ambulance.

OPPOSITE: Winston in a hydrotherapy tank.

Must Love Cats and Dogs

Idahoans Don't Just Like Their Pets, They Treat Them Like Family

By Mary S. Gilbert

Last year, Donna Julian of Boise spent six hundred dollars on Christmas presents for Bob, Sally, Sabrina, Poindexter, and Roy. The lucky five have their own dedicated room—outfitted with beds, a couch, and assorted toys—which was converted from a spare bedroom by Donna and

her husband, who refer to themselves as Mommy and Daddy. As you've guessed, the "children" are not human. They're cats. And among Idaho pet owners, the urge is growing to pamper their pooches and favor their felines above and beyond what one might expect to be the call of duty.

Idaho is an extraordinarily pet-loving state. In the most recent findings of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), which conducts a survey on pet ownership every five years, more than 73 percent of Idaho households had a pet during 2006. Only Vermont ranked higher, at 74.5 percent. About 49 percent of households in Idaho have dogs, and more than 48 percent have cats. The state's dog population is an estimated 479,000, compared to 517,000 cats.



Nationwide, nearly half of pet owners polled considered their animals to be members of their families.

The pet-as-human sentiment manifests in many ways for consumers. You can buy a cat spa activity center, which is a bubbling fountain that re-circulates flow to prevent stagnant drinking water. Your dog can have a bathrobe that ties at the waist, or a Superman costume, complete with the famous "S" logo and cape. A chaise cat bed is curved to look like modern sculpture and to fit more stylishly within a modern home. A contemporary bench designed to conceal a litter box purports to answer both the elimination needs of felines and the aesthetic and odor-removal needs of humans. Boiseans even can join the Pug Meetup Group, through which Pug owners assemble once a month to socialize and let their dogs get together, just like a play date for children.

Veterinary surgeon Jeff Brouman has observed the transformation from mere pet to beloved family member first-hand, as chief of staff at WestVet Animal Emergency and Specialty Centers in Garden City and Meridian. "Idaho

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Internist Dr. Victoria Ochoa examines a Boise patient.

has always had a fair number of cattle dogs and sporting dogs for working purposes, like herding and hunting, because the majority of the state is rural and lifestyles revolve around the outdoors," he said. "Some owners may have less of an emotional bond with their working dogs because they may focus more on the job at hand. That said, the vast majority of Idahoans with working dogs love their pets dearly and the human-animal bond is strong.

"The influx of people from other areas like California, where owners have long thought of their pets as family members, is having an effect on attitudes here. Another possible contributing factor is our growth in Idaho. What was once farmland is now becoming subdivisions. What were once dirt roads are now becom-

ing major paved streets. The change, however, is not confined to Idaho. It seems to be happening nationwide. It's clear that the human-animal bond is becoming stronger, and for good reason. Pets define the true meaning of unconditional love, and they provide a high level of companionship and loyalty."

Larry Eld, a retired Idaho veterinarian, concurs. "The reasons people have pets—for companionship, to share love—are the same, but with new people from other areas of the country has come a little different thinking in pet ownership. The human-animal bond is real and strong and enhanced by what's going on in peoples' lives. It's okay for people to get emotionally involved with pets and to grieve when they lose them. Human history has always had a companion animal, be it a dog, a horse or a

cat. Pets will love you. People with stress, jobs and kids can have tough times, but they love their pets and they get self-esteem and unconditional love from them, which is a factor in the human-animal bond.

"A pet is a family member, and its death can traumatize a family. The loss of a pet has a major impact. Suppose a child and a pet grew up together and the parents lost the child. The pet is the last connection to their child, and becomes almost a surrogate for the child. When the pet dies, the parents lose that connection. Some people need counseling when a pet dies."

Perhaps what is most indicative of the "I'll-do-anything-for-my-pet" mindset some owners have is their willingness to seek out and pay for advanced, and expensive, medical care. Many of the same sophisticated tech-

nologies and therapies that enable once-untreatable conditions to be addressed and cured in humans are now part of veterinary medicine, both in Idaho and nationwide.

The AVMA survey showed that Americans shelled out \$24.5 billion on veterinary expenditures in 2006.

WestVet, the first integrated animal emergency and specialty hospital in Idaho, offers a range of human-equivalent services for pets that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

"While family veterinarians treat many conditions themselves, they also refer their clients to us for certain diagnostic workups or treatments," said Brouman. "Our staff includes board-certified specialists who trained an additional four years after veterinary school."

WestVet has a cardiologist for heart problems and a feline behaviorist to treat both medical and behavioral problems in cats. Three specialty surgeons perform major procedures, such as fracture repair, joint replacements, and spinal and cancer surgery. The staff also includes an

ophthalmologist, a dermatologist, and an internist. MRIs and CAT scans (not for felines only!) are routine procedures. A physical therapist incorporates acupuncture, massage, and strength and endurance training, using land exercises and an underwater treadmill designed specifically for cats and dogs to optimize post-operative healing, strengthen weak

muscles and reduce obesity. The practice recently began operating the state's first pet ambulance, modifying an ambulance for people to include life-saving equipment and supplies for critically ill or injured pets. The vehicle is stocked with oxygen, gurneys, a crash cart for immediate shock treatment, medications, and intravenous fluids. Customized cages were built to help ensure the stability of small dogs and cats on oxygen.

Terri Hannah, who lives on a 180-acre air ranch in Caldwell, thought nothing of spending thousands of dollars for four procedures to implant a pacemaker into her now-deceased golden retriever. Hannah said Abigail was the state's first dog in which such a device was implanted.

When her current dog, Gracie, was eleven months old, she ate a special bone meant to clean teeth when chewed but not to be ingested. The bone became lodged in her intestines, requiring surgery for its removal. Post-operative complications necessitated her transfer to WestVet for further surgery, involving multiple plasma transfusions and the insertion of a temporary feeding

tube. Hannah incurred large costs to save the puppy.

"There's no limit to what my husband and I will do for our dogs," she said. "As far as we're concerned, our golden retrievers are our children, and they're treated that way. We operate airplanes, and we've flown our dogs to distant places for treatment. They eat New

York strip steak and filets along with their dog food. We wrap presents for them and put them under the Christmas tree. We take Gracie and her brother Willie to a coffee stand every day so they can have a cookie. Everyone in town knows them. Our only rule with them is that there are no rules."

Apparently, Hannah is an exception to Eld's general rule about the different attitudes of humans toward urban and rural pets.

"Historically, Idaho has been a rural area, and dogs and cats are more dispensable in rural areas," Eld said. "With working dogs in rural areas, it's all economic. Pets are important, but not so important that owners would spend megabucks for expensive procedures or surgeries to fix them up or pay for referrals. If animals are sick or old or too expensive to care for, they can be replaced. Rural people don't always have the money, and veterinary medicine is expensive. Economics drives a lot of how much people would do for their pet.

"In urban areas, we're all health-and-diet-conscious. People spend money for a premium diet line of pet food, because it's the thing to do. They think if it's a trend, then let's do it. There used to be a glass ceiling on what people would spend for [pet] medical care. In Boise it was one thousand dollars, and now it's closer to two thousand or three thousand dollars."

Let the psychologists argue over what it means when pets become irreplaceable family members. For the formerly pragmatic Idaho animal owner, the new way appears to be exactly how human and beast like it. ■

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