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ANOTHER VIEW

Brown: Park Ridge woman made a difference; now her cat does, too



Taffy, a Calico cat, died last year at age 17. Her owner, Sophie Walters of Park Ridge, died in 2009, leaving behind a substantial estate, some of it earmarked in a pet trust for Taffy. | Provided photo

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It would not be completely accurate to say that Taffy, the Calico cat, left behind an estate valued at more than \$121,000 when she died last March at age 17 in her Rogers Park home.

But you could certainly look at it that way.

What actually happened is that Taffy's former owner, Sophie Walters, left a considerably larger estate upon her own death in 2009, part of which she put into a trust fund for her beloved pet's continued care.

Walters, 82, of Park Ridge, bequeathed the remainder of her money to 11 animal-welfare charities. Now that Taffy has died, whatever money is left in the trust also goes to those charities.

I don't know exactly how much we're talking about here. Walters set up her affairs to avoid Probate Court, which means there is no public record.

From what I have pieced together, though, each of the charities initially received a \$138,000 payout in 2010. That would place the total value of Walters' estate somewhere upwards of \$1.5 million.

Taffy's inheritance was in addition to that amount, as is the \$121,000 that I'll explain later.

The cat's money was kept in a pet trust established through ATG Trust Company, which made a monthly payment to Taffy's caregiver. The funds were used to cover the costs of Taffy's care and maintenance, according to Kathryn Van Eeuwen, ATG's president.

It's not as if Taffy lived out the rest of her years dining on caviar. Fancy Feast was her meal of preference.

But, as you might imagine, a cat with a trust fund was a very pampered kitty with her own wardrobe of colorful sweaters for winter visits to the veterinarian.

"She was a lap cat. She didn't like to be alone," said Karen Norwood, who worked as Walters' personal caregiver at a Park Ridge assisted-living facility during the final years of Walters' life when she was bedridden.

Norwood's responsibilities included taking care of Taffy. She did such a good job that Walters entrusted her with the cat after she died.

Walters had a two-bedroom unit in the care facility, with the second bedroom set up especially for Taffy, who was adopted from an animal shelter.

Walters never married and had no children. Her only family member was an older sister with whom she shared a house in Park Ridge. The sister died first.

“My only friend was my sister,” Walters told Norwood.

That sounds sad, but Norwood said Walters wasn’t unhappy.

Walters considered her pets to be family members. She kept urns containing the cremated remains of various cats and dogs in her closet.

When she was younger, Walters worked as a scientist doing some type of testing, said Norwood, who wasn’t sure where.

Walters was a very private person, so private, in fact, that she might not have approved of this story.

Before she died, she instructed Norwood not to allow the care facility to follow its normal practice of displaying her photo in the library because she didn’t know anyone there. For that reason, I don’t have her photo, either.

I’m forever fascinated with quiet people who lead anonymous lives who, in death, take on new dimensions through their surprising charity.

Walters shared her wealth with all the big animal-welfare charities like PAWS and also with smaller ones like the Buddy Foundation in Arlington Heights and the Hooved Animal Humane Society in Woodstock. She made a difference.

But Walters’ story would never have come to light if not for the aforementioned \$121,000 — \$121,479 to be exact — that landed in the unclaimed property accounts of the Illinois state treasurer’s office.

Despite Walters’ careful estate planning, a savings account she held at JPMorgan Chase Bank somehow fell through the cracks following her death. After five years with no activity on the account, the bank turned over the money to the state treasurer in 2014, as the law requires.

It was only when treasurer’s office employees searched for the money’s rightful owner that they learned about the trust for Taffy, the cat.

Whether the money ever really belonged to Taffy is a little fuzzy. But it makes for a better story.

It’s also a good reminder to check the treasurer’s unclaimed property database every so often because I can promise your cat won’t.