



# Friends for Life

By Lynne Gunville

On behalf of *Vet Topics*, freelance writer Lynne Gunville spoke to Pat and Bill Yeudall and their daughter Candice about their volunteer efforts with the Western College of Veterinary Medicine's Radiation Oncology Service.

In the past two years, the Saskatoon family has provided a temporary foster home for 17 pets. The animals were all cancer patients receiving three to four weeks of daily treatments at the veterinary college's pet radiation therapy centre. Through the WCVM's foster program, families from out of town can access outpatient treatment for their pets without having them hospitalized. Volunteers like the Yeudalls provide the pets with loving homes — allowing the animals to lead normal lives during their treatments.

Bill, Pat and Candice remember every pet they've fostered. They describe them as "keepers," saying that every one of them has had good characteristics. "You'd do anything for them because they'll do anything for you," says Pat, who often refers to "puppies" in the conversation — her affectionate term for the adult dogs that come to live with her family.

To learn about the WCVM Radiation Oncology Service's foster program, call 306-966-1894 or 306-966-1257, or please email [erica.collen@usask.ca](mailto:erica.collen@usask.ca).

**VT: Can you describe your role as a foster family?**

**Pat:** Basically we provide a home for the pets and any love and attention that they need. We feel that when any of them are away from home, they feel better and respond to treatment better when they're in a non-hospital environment. We try to make it a spa-like situation where they are the centre of the universe with total care, total attention.

**VT: How did you begin fostering?**

**Pat:** I get the on-campus newspaper and there was an article in it, so I brought it home so Bill could see it. Bill had recently retired and we had lost all our pets so we were without pets. He thought this was a really good program that would allow us to have pets without owning them. We still have the unconditional love, the companionship, absolutely everything that a person would want having pets but only on a part-time basis. We travel a lot and this works very well for us. We get somebody's wonderfully trained "puppy" or whatever, and we have the right to say no if we're not going to be here.

**VT: How does the process work?**

**Pat:** When foster care is required for an animal, someone calls from WCVM's pet radiation therapy centre and asks if we're available for the set period of time and if we're interested. If we say yes, we receive the



necessary information. We don't communicate with the pet owner. WCVM staff members have a questionnaire that they send to the family, and it asks the questions that we or other foster families have asked.

For example, we need to determine whether they have problems with certain people or with other animals. The questionnaire also asks about the pets' socialization and about any problems they might have with stairs or other issues. It provides information about a day in the life of the pets so we can try to keep things reasonably close to what they have at home without totally disrupting their lives.

All of the communication goes through WCVM's pet radiation therapy centre. We talk to WCVM staff daily and then they talk to the family daily. The staff members give them the medical information whereas we just provide the love.

**VT: Describe an average day with a foster animal.**

**Bill:** The first thing that normally happens during the week is that we have to take the critter in for care. Usually the animals are happy to go to the clinic — that's something that surprises me. But they take very good care of them at the clinic, and they can be quite pleased to go and visit. Generally we ask the clinic staff to call as soon as the animal is available so we can pick it up as soon as possible. Then we bring the animal back here.

Depending on how the animal feels, we go for a walk in the afternoon. Often we get home by lunch time, and I take the pet for a walk or a play in the back yard. Pat and Candice do a lot of the care in the evening, but the pets are generally with me during the day.

**Pat:** Candice is often around during the day as well, so the pet will usually have somebody around 24 hours a day. The pets are rarely left alone. They have somebody there to touch them, to cuddle them, to do whatever they need at that precise minute, hour, whatever.

**Bill:** Weekends are a little different, of course, because they don't have to go in for treatment. Quite often they like to sleep in, but some of them will want to get up and go out early. It just depends on the animal. They spend a lot of time with us on the weekends — it's very much a family affair.

**VT: Are the animals allowed to eat before their treatments?**

**Bill:** They can't eat from about 10 o'clock at night until after they've had their treatment in the morning, so we generally try to feed them last about 9:30 p.m. the night before. The clinic often feeds them after their treatments while waiting for us to come for them. I feed them as appropriate, depending on the size of the animal and how often they're normally fed.

**VT: Do you give the animals any special treatment?**

**Pat:** When the pets come to our place, we adopt them for that period of time. They become ours — like they're our own. We treat them the same as if we owned them. And we give them all the love and care that we can possibly give them. They're just ours. So they get special treatment. We have toy boxes of all-purpose toys. Some pets like squeaky toys; some like bouncing balls; some like tugs. It depends on the companion.

We have mats in various places of the house in various rooms because some animals like to sit with Bill when he's sitting in his favourite chair in the living room, and others will like to sit, depending on the time of day, with Candice or me by our computers or in the family room. Some will not go up on a sofa because that's the way they're trained, so they'll sit on the mat beside us. But we have no objections to them sitting on a sofa or any of the furniture if that's the way they're trained. Basically they have free run and they tell us what they want.

**VT: How has your life changed by your decision to foster?**

**Bill:** I do a lot more driving, but that's not a problem for us. I'm getting more exercise, and that's good for me. The dogs will often get two or three walks a day if they're up for it. Candice seems to end up quite often with the dogs sleeping with her. She's got the biggest bed in the house, so it's been rather humorous sometimes when she ends up with a 183-pound Great Dane sharing the bed with her!

**Pat:** For me, it's having the unconditional love that the companions will give no matter how sick they are. They still try to please; they don't give up; they're always there. They show such courage and forgiveness. It's something that I think we learn from. They teach us a lot.

**Candice:** It makes me realize how much you can endure in life if you have somebody. They're away from their family and in a situation that's really hard for them to understand, yet they're willing to get on with their lives. It makes you look at your own life and think that if they can do it, then surely you can.

**VT: Do you ever have more than one animal at a time?**

**Pat:** It depends. Occasionally the college will give two pets if the animals get along and they're used to other puppies (dogs); that's happened to us once. We also look after puppies for friends, but we first make sure that the animals get along. If they get along great and the friends need to go away, we'll bring in other pets. So far we've had no problems at all.

We also have a friend with a Husky-cross dog who comes over so that the puppy we're fostering will have somebody to play with (if the animals are compatible). As you know, dogs are very social animals, and if they're off-leash trained, they've had many puppies around them. They miss this part, so we try to bring in some companions — we try to set up play dates. The pets really enjoy it. When you watch a Great Dane play tug with a little beagle and the beagle is winning, it does good for absolutely everybody.

**VT: How has fostering affected you?**

**Pat:** You know we're doing this totally for selfish reasons.

**Candice:** When the house has been empty for a week or so, we start getting itchy. At one time, we had two cats, but before we got into the program, the house had been empty for about a month, and we were all going stir crazy. We notice that now. If it's been much more than a week, we start wondering when we're going to get our next one because we're so used to a pet being there even if it's just lying on the mat. It's that extra presence in the house.

**Pat:** In your heart.

**VT: Do you have a particular animal that stands out as a favourite?**

**Pat:** We call them keepers.

**Candice:** The majority of them are keepers, especially right after we've had them, but a few of them kind of stick out. The second one that we had was a favourite of us all because of the level of training and the personality there. For Pat especially, the Great Dane was a real keeper just because he was such a "puppy."

**Pat:** He was only two years old. He would romp and shake the house!

**Candice:** It's a unique experience. For me it was the smallest one we've ever had. He was almost like a cat, and he was a little baby. He liked to be in everything. The one, I think, that all of us agree on was our last one, and she was an Australian blue heeler. She was such a genuinely nice animal.

**Pat:** But we could comment on every one of them because we remember all of them. All of them have good characteristics, and you'd do anything for them because they'll do anything for you.

**VT: Do you record your time with the pets?**

**Pat:** We take pictures. Every day there's some sort of picture or pictures taken. And every day there's a diary entry made. It starts off with our communication with the clinic telling us the information about the puppy. Then when the puppy arrives, we make the first entry and for every day that they are here, there is an entry. We write down the funny things . . . anything that happens in the home. We give back, we hope, the month of the life that they didn't see.

We make a booklet, and usually there are eight or more pages of written stuff plus about 300 pictures. A thumbnail, an index of tiny pictures, is attached to the book, and a CD or DVD of the actual photos is included. Candice is the one who puts together a DVD of the pictures set to music along with comments. We send the raw material, and that includes all of the diary plus all of the pictures. We also take pictures at the reunion, and if the owners communicate with us, we send them a final CD or DVD. The booklet includes all our information — our names, address, phone number, and email address. Those that choose to do so can communicate with us.\*

*\*While it's routine practice for the Yeudall family to create a wonderful record of each pet's stay, this isn't a requirement for foster families involved in the WCVN foster program.*

**VT: Do you often hear back from the owners?**

**Pat:** Some communicate regularly, and others will communicate a couple of times a year — often on special occasions like the puppy's birthday, or whatever. About 50 per cent of the people communicate with us directly. We find out what's happening with the others by asking the radiation staff, and they let us know if they get an update. Because we just can't let the pets go. They're part of us and they won't ever really leave us. You see, we do it because we get so much out of it. It's never a consideration of anything else. It's something we need to do for ourselves.

**VT: Do you have anything else that you would like to add?**

**Pat:** I feel very privileged to be able to bring these pets home and to be trusted enough to look after them. What they give and what I receive from them is uncountable. You can't rate it; you can't put a dollar value on it. They give so much.

**Bill:** The other thing that really gets through to me is when we finally meet the people at the end of the treatment. When it's time for puppy or kitty to go home, we go over to meet the owners and to see the reaction. We always try to work it so that they're finished paying their bills and hearing all the information about their pets. The staff brings them over to the clinic, and when they walk in, the reaction . . . seeing one, the reaction of the person and two, the reaction of the animal, it's just . . . the reward is right there. It's incredible.

**Pat:** Well, you know they're loved or else they wouldn't be here. It's an expensive treatment, and when you meet some of the people, you know that they could have used that money towards a new car or whatever. But they opted to give it to somebody they loved.

**Candice:** And it really speaks to them. They've been gone four to six weeks, and they haven't had any contact with their people during that time and there's this instant recognition — this is my person.

**Pat:** And they don't fail to tell you. They come around as if to say, "See this is my mommy, my daddy, or somebody. They have come for me . . . see?" There is no doubt that's exactly what they're saying. They'll go to every person that's important to them and run back to their owner. They run back and forth and introduce them, so to speak: "This is my person. Look at my person." They let you know that their special person has come. We can't keep them. Not from their reaction.

**VT:** It was really nice to meet you, and I wish you lots of luck in the future.

**Pat:** Don't wish us luck; wish us lots of puppies. We want lots of puppies. **V**