

Pet owner extraordinaire

She acknowledges that caring for a disabled pet is hard work. -NST

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MARJAN Sipsma is a pet owner extraordinaire. She dotes on her five dogs, five cats and a kitten.

Not only that, she is totally committed to her paralysed terrier mix, Snoopy.

Several times a day, she has to carry all 12kg of Snoopy to the garden for exercises.

She also cleans after the dog, plays with him and turns him over.

When she walks the other dogs in the evening, Snoopy comes along in a wagon.

At night, Sipsma sets her alarm clock to ring every three hours so she can adjust his position to prevent sores.

Sipsma, an expatriate from the Netherlands who has been in the country for more than a decade, acknowledges that caring for a disabled pet is hard work.

"I am thankful to my maid for her help. There are only two options - you make the sacrifice, or you put the dog down - and I'm not very good with the last one."

Just a puppy when he got hit by a car eight years ago, Snoopy's entire back was smashed to a pulp.

Some children brought him to the veterinarian, where he was nursed back to health.

Adopted by Sipsma three-and-a-half years ago, Snoopy was struck by tragedy another three times.

"He became paralysed after collapsing, falling down and choking on a bone. At one point, his eyes were the only parts that could move."

Snoopy has had a vet acupuncturist and animal communicator-cum-masseuse work on him, and has just started going for a weekly swim as part of physiotherapy.

While Sipsma believes Snoopy will never walk again because of the extent of his injuries, she hopes he will one day recover enough muscle mass to turn himself over or shift his weight.

Klang Valley-based pet rescuers Joanne Low and Leigh Chen are also caring for disabled pets.

Kiki, a stray, hurt himself when he was 3 weeks old, losing the function of his hind legs.

Low and Chen have tried almost everything under the sun to get Kiki cured - from conventional treatments, which involve X-rays and nerve tests, to alternative medicine and acupuncture - to no avail.

Treatments have so far set the two friends and donors back by some RM10,000 (S\$4,160).

Now 8 months old, Kiki scoots on his bottom to move around. His right hind leg was amputated three months ago after he developed a habit which saw him constantly chewing on it.

The biggest challenge for Low, who houses Kiki, is to clean up after him because of his loss of bladder and bowel control.

"I do get annoyed at times. Caring for a handicapped pet is troublesome, but when you get to know him and his funny character, it's worth it," says Low, who has another dog which needs special care.

Latte, a chihuahua, suffers from an incurable neurological problem which prevents her from standing straight and walking properly. Low bought the dog from a pet shop.

Another person who takes in unwanted animals is property manager Kathy Revi.

She keeps 12 cats in her centre, one of which is Jumaat Oktober.

The cat has feline leukaemia, an incurable viral disease.

Because of her vulnerable immune system, Jumaat has to be kept indoors all the time.

Kathy has been feeding her lingzhi tablets, made from medicinal mushrooms, for the last five years to boost her immunity.

Found seven years ago at a construction site, Jumaat was stuck in mud up to the neck.

Kathy also feeds and sterilises strays -- both cats and dogs -- which venture into the compound of the property she manages.

The animated animal lover says her family has cared for animals, including chickens and goats, and nursed injured wild foxes for as long as she can recall.

Her parents had a three-legged cat called Tripod, and Kathy, a cat with renal failure which needed dialysis.

Often, a pet's quality of life can be improved with management, says a Dr Teoh from a veterinary clinic in Kuala Lumpur.

Dr Teoh says his disabled dog Mei Mei has been happier since he bought a RM1,500 custom-made cart from the United States for her.

Similarly, Sipsma has also got Snoopy a four-wheel cart, shoes and a cooling mat from the United States.

For these pet owners, euthanasia is the last resort.

"Why put Kiki down when he's strong, healthy and playful?" asks Chen.

Kathy says she doesn't always take suggestions from vets to put animals to sleep.

"If a vet suggests it because taking care of the pet is going to cost me a lot of money and time, I'll put my foot down. But if the injury is too severe and the animal is suffering, then there's no choice."

Sipsma says she is not opposed to the idea of euthanasia, having put down sick pets before, but she believes that as long as an animal is healthy, it's unfair to terminate its life.

She recounts the time when she first saw a dog in a wheelchair on a television programme in the Netherlands years back.

"When I saw the dog wearing nappies and being brought out in a cart, I said, 'Oh c'mon! If it's time to go, it's time to go'.

"But once you're in that position, it changes your entire perception.

"On the other hand, if my dog or cat is in pain and there's no light at the end of the tunnel, I'll be the first to put it down because it's selfish to keep it alive for my sake. Loving an animal is knowing when to let go."