

# Best friend's friends

When four-legged companions of older folks need special care, these groups step in



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**W**hen her 11-year-old Jack Russell terrier developed kidney failure in 2009, Jean, 86, of Huntington Station had to put down her beloved pet. Three months later, her husband died, leaving her with an overwhelming sense of loss.

Not long after, a concerned friend told her, "You need a new dog." And Jean took the advice. When she first saw Ariel, a Lhasa Apso mix, at an animal adoption fair, "She was dancing around in her cage," recalled Jean, a grandmother of four. "The volunteer said, 'This one is too lively for you,' but I liked her look." And despite the warning, Ariel went home with Jean. "It was a love affair ever since," she said.

But Jean also worried that with her advanced age and health concerns, she might not be up to taking care of her new charge. So when a town worker delivering Meals on Wheels admired Ariel, Jean asked where she might get some help.

"She said, 'Would you like a volunteer to come and walk her?'" and I said, 'Does a bird have wings?'" Jean recalled. The worker put her in touch with PAWS (Pioneers for Animal Welfare Society), a rescue organization that runs the Seniors With Animals Project, better known as SWAP.

The SWAP program is one of several offered by local rescue groups that help seniors maintain their companion animals at a time when they still cherish the bond, yet sometimes struggle to care for them due to declining health or limited finances. Groups like PAWS are recognizing that an aging population means more older pet owners are in need of

help with adopting and keeping their pets.

### 'Get rid of it'

"A lot of times what happens is that the [adult] child comes in and says, 'You can't take care of this dog or cat, let's just get rid of it,'" said Melissa Gillespie, executive director of PAWS on Long Island. "They don't get the importance of seniors having animals. They just regard them as a headache. So now you've just got rid of the senior's best friend and the animal ends up in a shelter, and they completely break down. They are in a cage, shaking, they get kennel cough or something and they tend to get euthanized because they are usually senior animals deemed unadoptable."

Gillespie said PAWS works to give relatives a better understanding of the pet's importance. "We try to educate the family and make them realize . . . this [pet] is the reason the senior gets up in the morning. They have to realize that this is a major part of their day."

In Jean's case, PAWS sent Judy Iilmensee, a volunteer who visits once a week and takes Ariel on a long walk. Jean "was having some difficulty getting around and . . . was having trouble getting the dog enough exercise," explained Iilmensee, 66, a retired teacher from Huntington. "Ariel has given her a reason to hang in there. It's a typical senior story where they are inseparable from their pet, but they need help."

SWAP started about a year ago and includes several programs. One brings animals to nursing homes to cheer residents; another helps seniors with training and placement of animals they can't care for

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### ON THE COVER

Lucille, 93, with Riley, 14. The PAWS animal welfare group is helping them.

Once a week Judith Iilmensee, 66, a volunteer with Pioneers for Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), visits Jean, 86, in Huntington and takes her lively dog, Ariel, on a long walk. **PHOTO BY HEATHER WALKER**



Dori Scofield, left, founder and president of Save-A-Pet, and Kathleen Rogers, 63, of Centereach, with her dog Chance, a 13-year-old Chow-Corgi she adopted through the Port Jefferson Station group's "Old Friends With Benefits" program. **PHOTO BY HEATHER WALKER**

## THERE TO HELP

Groups on Long Island that offer older pet owners discounts on adoptions and other assistance

### PAWS (Pioneers for Animal Welfare Society) paws-li.org, Hicksville

PAWS' Seniors with Animals Project (SWAP) provides pet care for the animals of seniors in their homes, nursing homes and assisted-living facilities; services include walking pets, their food, transport to the vet, training and animal placement. "Animeals" brings pet food to seniors who also receive home-delivered meals or who go to senior centers for their meals. It tries to place senior animals who have lost their home due to the death or disability of their senior

### GLEN COVE ANIMAL LOVERS LEAGUE animalloversleague.us 40 Shore Rd., Glen Cove 516-676-5913

The Safe Haven program houses eligible pets for seniors who are temporarily unable to care for them. The pets are cared for and returned when the senior is able. The league participates in the Purina "Pets for People" program and refunds adoption fees for pet owners 55 and older. The

### "Young at Heart" program is for pets 6 years and older that are paired with eligible owners 60 and older who need financial help for pet food and veterinary care.

### SAVE-A-PET saveapetli.net 608 Rte. 112, Port Jefferson Station 631-473-6333

The "Old Friends With Benefits" program pairs senior dogs and cats adopted from the Save-A-Pet shelter with no adoption fee to new owners; free food, grooming, checkups and vaccines are included at the Save-A-Pet clinic.

### NORTH SHORE ANIMAL LEAGUE animalleague.org 25 Davis Ave., Port Washington 516-883-7575

Seniors 60 and older can adopt an adult pet from the league and may qualify for no adoption fee, two free groomings annually, free annual vaccinations and discounted veterinary care and microchipping. The league's Olga Graham Fund helps some seniors with limited incomes. To qualify, an adopter must be 60 or older and must take home an adult animal. Participants are chosen on a first-come

### LAST HOPE ANIMAL RESCUE AND REHABILITATION lasthopeanimalrescue.org 3300 Beltagh Ave., Wantagh 631-425-1884

Works with local Petcos, PetSmarts and Petlands to showcase cats for adoption. Promotes rescue of dogs and cats in local municipal shelters; provides low-cost spay

### LITTLE SHELTER 33 Warner Rd., Huntington 631-368-8770

There's a pantry for those who cannot afford pet food. The shelter also brings animals to nursing homes for pet therapy. **PHOTO BY HEATHER WALKER**

# When older pet keepers need a friend

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anytime. A third service is "Animeals," where pet food is delivered along with Meals on Wheels. Jennifer Devine, SWAP chairwoman and a geriatric social worker, said many seniors find that having a pet is soothing and reassuring, even with the extra work.

### Rescuing pet to person

Rescue advocates say matching seniors to the right pet is key. "We have some seniors who come in and want to adopt a kitten or a puppy. We know that's not going to work, so we do our best to match them with a more appropriate animal," said Linda Stuurman, president of Last Hope Animal Rescue, which has an adoption center in Wantagh.

"Older dogs and older people make a perfect match," acknowledges Dori Scofield, founder and president of Save-A-Pet in Port Jefferson Station. "But taking an older pet is a big responsibility because they may have more medical needs than a younger animal." Save-A-Pet charges no adoption fee to eligible seniors and can provide free annual checkups, blood work and vaccinations at their in-house clinics. "Anything we can financially afford that isn't crazy, we will do," said Scofield. The group also has an "Old Friends With Benefits" program, which provides free pet food to eligible seniors 60 and older, whose pets are age 7 or older.

The program helped Kathleen Rogers, 63, of Centereach decide whether to adopt a 13-year-old Chow-Corgi mix from Save-A-Pet. Chance is "the best dog you could ever want — very mellow — and he is great with kids," she said. She adopted Chance in March 2012, but with the looming prospect of retirement, the Old Friends program assured her she could provide for him. "If I stop working, I couldn't afford to have him," Rogers explained. "So knowing the program is there when I need it is very important to me." For pet owners who are suddenly unable to care for their pet, there is Safe Haven, based at the Glen Cove Animal Lovers League. Safe Haven temporarily boards eligible pets at no charge while the owner — often a senior — is hospitalized, is in rehab or has a personal emergency. The



Ariel, a Lhasa Apso mix, and Jean comfort each other in Jean's Huntington home. Once a week, a volunteer with PAWS visits Jean to help the 86-year-old walk her companion. **PHOTO BY HEATHER WALKER**

alternative — paying to board the animal with a vet — usually costs more than many on a fixed income can afford.

"We take pets, hold them and give them back when the senior is ready," said Joan Phillips, co-founder and president of the animal league. The program has helped 228 seniors so far, many of them victims of superstorm Sandy. "We can't keep a dog in a kennel forever, so it's based on the animal's well-being," she said. "And if they can't be confined, we will try and find a foster [home] for them." The league also adoption fees and discounted adoption fees and veterinary care. And its "Young at Heart" program helps those 60 and older, with pets age 6 and older, pay for food and veterinary care. At Little Shelter in Hunt-

ton, there is a food pantry for those who can no longer afford pet food. "We would rather keep the animal in the home than have them come to an overcrowded shelter," said Arleen Leone, special projects manager.

### Old dogs can learn new tricks

Some rescue groups, such as PAWS, offer help from volunteers who can also train. Barbara Horn, whose 93-year-old mother, Lucille, has a 14-year-old terrier mix named Riley, asked PAWS for help with his anxiety and tendency to bark. "We brought this dog into our family to address the physical and emotional needs of an aging senior," said Horn. With age, her mother was becoming increasingly upset — a condition that seemed to intensify after superstorm

Sandy forced them from their Long Beach apartment, Horn said.

"Mom was getting confused and anxious, especially when we had to move. But when she saw a dog, she would become calm and relaxed; the rest of the world went away and everything would be good," she said. But Riley, adopted from a Brooklyn shelter, had been abused and needed help calming down. And after superstorm Sandy, Horn, 62, said, "he started acting skittish." Riley would start barking when Lucille tried to go outside alone. So Horn thought, perhaps, he could be trained to be a service dog to help monitor her mother's whereabouts.

Horn asked PAWS for an assessment of whether Riley could be up to the task. "They said he is a good candidate but

has some fear issues," she said. Now, he's in training, courtesy of the organization.

There's also help when owners can no longer care for their beloved pets. In August, Margie Stark's brother, Jimmy, 49, was found unconscious in the Oyster Bay apartment he shared with Debbie and Lucy, two cats, ages 12 and 14.

"We actually don't know what happened to him," said Stark, 60, who lives outside of Gainesville, Fla. Jimmy was in a coma for 10 days and when he woke up, he had no short-term memory and faced weeks of impending physical therapy before going to a nursing home to live. A new owner had to be found for the cats.

Her brother "had always expressed that if anything happened to him, he wanted to make sure that somebody took care of his cats," Stark said. None of Jimmy's siblings could take the cats, so they were boarded for weeks.

"I was calling all kinds of people on Long Island and everybody was telling me that it was going to be so hard to find a home for these cats because they are so old," Stark recalled. The cats, meanwhile, were being boarded with a veterinarian and losing weight. "We had gotten to the point where my sister on Long Island was saying, 'We have to make a decision — we can't keep paying the vet.'"

Finally, Stark got in touch with Gillespie at PAWS, who put out an email blast asking for help in placing the cats. Soon, Stark was getting calls and emails from all over the country. "We got an overwhelming response," she said, including a man in his 50s who lived in Syosset. He went to see the cats and later called her.

"They weren't what he was expecting, but they won his heart," Stark said. He adopted Debbie and Lucy and sent photos to Stark. "In the first one, they were thin and hiding, but in the second one, they looked much better," she said. "He has also said that if we want to bring the cats to see my brother, he will allow it, or if my brother recovers he would give them back."

Stark is grateful and relieved a good home was found for Jimmy's pets. "My brother always asks about his cats," she said. "After all, they were his babies."