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## **Pet ownership: Unconditional love**

**Pet ownership supports physical, mental health**

By Nick Hilbourn

For The Sun News

Cathy Prince is busy.

It's around 5 p.m., she's just finishing up a riding lesson and she still has to lead horses out to pasture and give them water. And she's going to do all of this, conceivably, before nightfall.

Zippering back and forth, from pasture to stable, from far away Prince looks like she's caught in a pinball machine. But look closer and you'll see the bright face, the calm eyes and wide smile. This is where she wants to be. This is where she needs to be.

She made her living as a science teacher, but she knew her life was going to be about animals from the time she was 2. Her grandfather let her ride a mule, and she never forgot it.

Now she and her husband own a stable just a short walk from their house. Many of the horses in it belong to friends, local horse owners who need a place to keep their animals. Prince obliges them gladly.

Watching her interact with the horses, it's easy to see that it's much more than a job to her. Her personality is naturally upbeat, but when she walks through the stable, she seems electric.

Although many of the horses belong to others, one in particular is hers, Prince says.

Moving through the stable, she stops by the stall of a white-and-black-speckled Arabian horse named Jafar, opens the door and runs her hands along his mane.

"Jafar's what holds me together," she says. "Jafar and the good Lord."

Jafar has been with her for years. She almost lost him three times, but he always managed to pull through. She remembers she hasn't always been so lucky.

"Years ago we had a little pony named Scruffy. She had long hair, even in the summertime. I used her for riding lessons and trail rides," she says.

Scruffy was diagnosed with liver disease.

"When she was dying, several of my friends came by. One of my friends brought his daughter, who had practiced riding on her, to say goodbye. It's hard to lose something you love that much and he wanted her to learn compassion."

She says the friends she's gained from her work with horses are some of the best people she's ever known, but even the best humans fall short of the kind of affection animals provide.

"Dogs and cats tend to love you no matter what," says Dr. Cory Armitage, a veterinarian at VCA Palmetto Animal Hospital in Conway. He believes animals' unlimited devotion to their owners is what draws people so close to them.

"They give unconditional love, no matter what your mood is," he says. "You come in crabby, that kind of rubs off on people, but not pets; they're happy to see you, happy to get fed. They take away some of the crabbiness."

His colleague at VCA, Dr. Kimberly Newman, agrees.

"I have three cats and when I'm in a bad mood, one of them jumps immediately into my lap," she says. "He wants attention, he demands it, he thinks he's a dog in cat's clothing. He follows me around the house, I mean, I can't see myself going home and not having a pet there."

People have pets because they will give you love "when you don't feel like anyone else is loving you."

Modern science points toward the benefits of pet ownership and animal interaction as well.

In 2001, Dr. Karen Allen, a research scientist at the University of Buffalo, conducted an experiment to test the supposed benefits of pet ownership. She gave a group of stockbrokers, who described their work as extremely stressful, prescriptions of Lisinopril for high blood pressure.

Half of the experiment's participants were assigned an adopted pet from a local animal shelter. All of the participants had lower stress levels as a result of the Lisinopril; however, in stressful situations the participants who did not own pets had increases in blood pressure that were more than half that of the participants who owned pets.

Allen said there could be numerous reasons for this, but the main one was the companionship the pets provided.

"Although the idea that a pet serves as social support may appear peculiar to some people," she says, "pet owners talk to and confide in their pets and describe them as important friends. Because pets, unlike humans, are perceived as nonjudgmental."

Pet ownership can decrease blood pressure, cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and feelings of loneliness, while increasing opportunities for exercise, outdoor activities and socialization, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Beyond the medical reasons, pets affect people in a way that, although it cannot be measured in a laboratory, is unmistakably real and life-changing.

Rita Rhodes, executive director of the Horry County Humane Society, says growing up on a farm in West Virginia, where she was surrounded by animals all the time "made me a little bit more caring, more patient."

She thinks children benefit from a family pet because it teaches them important life lessons at an early age.

"It exposes them to responsibility," she explains, and "it teaches them to love and care for something else."

Rhodes said her five dogs have taught her to be grateful.

"I've seen the kind of conditions they've been in and they're still loving, grateful to have been helped," she says.

Rhodes, like many pet owners, doesn't know what she would do if she came home and there were no pets to greet her. When she comes home from a stressful day at work, she needs them there to help her relax. She believes that a world without animals would have a lot more stressed-out people, a lot more bad situations.

"I truly believe animals are good for you," she says. "They teach you how to interact with each other and be kind to each other."

In her work with animals, she's noticed they can teach people about the importance of interaction because "the thing they thrive on is interaction. If they didn't have interaction, they wouldn't be very happy."

And she believes interacting with a pet provides a perfect starting point for interacting with people.

Several of her shy friends who have adopted pets have, as a result, she says, become more social, more talkative with other people.

Animals, she explains, are excellent at building self-confidence. "It makes me feel really good that there's something that wants my attention, that wants me to be around. A lot of people don't get that from humans, but they get it from animals."

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