

THE AUSTRALIAN
Women's Weekly

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WORDS *by* BEVERLEY HADGRAFT

With an industry that is now generating billions, Aussie 'pawrents' are showering their fur babies with extravagant gifts, yoga classes, luxury hotel stays and unprecedented adoration – in life and in death.

As bar mitzvahs go it was pretty special. Thirteen-year-old Murray, dressed in the traditional skullcap and tallit shawl, was chauffeured to the Randwick Community Centre in a Tesla, jumped out onto a red carpet and was blessed by a rabbi watched by 100 people and 35 of his best friends.

“Muzzletoft,” everyone said and, no, you haven’t read that wrong. Murray is a dog, a Groodle to be precise, and this, to be equally precise, was actually a ‘bark mitzvah’.

How did it come about?

“It was a good opportunity for a party,” laugh ‘pawrents’ Gina Solomon and Karen Alpert. “We don’t have kids and while you can’t compare a dog to a child, he’s our child. He’s Jewish, a male and he turned 13, so why not?”

Murray’s doggy-do included a ‘pawtini’ cocktail station with chicken broth in plastic martini glasses, a grazing table with turkey meatballs and other doggy delights, and even a bark mitzvah blue and white cake with a Star of David in the middle.

The dogs played games, including jumping into ball pits to forage for treats, and each went home with a gift box containing biscuits with Murray’s face on them and a toy dog bone imprinted with the word “kosher”.

Meanwhile, the humans had their own fun. “You know how people have flash mobs? We did a fleash mob to *Ain’t Nothing But a Hound Dog* wearing Murray masks,” laughs Gina.

The bark mitzvah was organised by Claire Ohannessian and Renee Jernigan. They started their Let’s Pawty business, creating fantastic dog parties, two years ago and are constantly in demand.

With an events-planning background, they ask ‘pawrents’ to choose a theme, then provide photogenic props. These include: Jungle (vines, stuffed monkeys and giraffes), Under The Sea (octopi and treasure chests) and Princess. “We had one princess party where everything was ballerina-themed and pink, and



the ‘pawrents’ also wanted entertainment so we had a live human ballerina dancing in one of those big plastic balls.”

Parties generally cost around \$1000, which includes all food from a local dog bakery plus props, pawtinis, games, gift boxes and styling. It’s up there with a pretty special kids’ birthday party.

Claire believes the COVID pandemic has created a new interest in pets. “We spent so much time at home with them, we have developed much closer bonds,” she says. “Also, COVID impacted single people getting into new relationships so their relationship with their dog became even more important.”

According to Animal Medicines Australia’s (AMA) *Pets and the Pandemic* report, pet ownership rose to 69 per cent of households during COVID, up from 61 per cent three years ago. And predictably, spending on those pets rose also. Even the conservative RSPCA puts spending on our 29 million pets at \$13 billion a year, while AMA claims we spend over \$20 billion on dogs alone.

There is no shortage of expensive pet presents for those who wonder

Increasingly lavish, dog parties include cocktail stations, grazing tables, cakes and ball pits. Canine guests play games, enjoy live entertainment and go home at the end of the party with a gift box full of goodies.

how such a sum is reached. A range of eye-wateringly expensive collars is headed by Prada, whose crystal-studded satin versions cost \$595 a pop. There are pet hampers, fashion outfits, a range of little doggie shoes and even pet perfumes, probably not the favoured gift for dogs who generally prefer something a little more ... well, pungent.

However, for those owners who don’t wish to anthropomorphise their pets, the biggest expenditure is on food, with many no longer content simply to open a can. Fi Eakin does a roaring trade in “highly nutritious pupcakes” which start at \$29 and which she sells for anything from canine birthdays to weddings. She’s a regular at doggy daycare Centennial Bark, in Sydney’s Waterloo, which orders her cakes and biscuits for their

pooches' parties. The colourful creations come in apple and cheese or carrot and peanut butter flavours and she also makes ice-creams, a mix of poached chicken, yoghurt, spinach, blueberries and ginger blitzed together and placed inside a cream cheese mould then popped into a cone.

She originally intended them for cats but ... well, you know cats. They turned their noses up at them.

Over in Melbourne, meanwhile, customised canine catering business ilume has hit a whole new level of dietary provision, attaching a Fitbit device to dog collars then collating the resulting data to create the next fortnight's diet.

The food which is "beautifully-plated, scientifically-backed, restaurant quality for dogs" is "created under the supervision of a culinary director using fresh, human-grade produce". The packages of

Below: Dogs enjoy nutritious 'pupcakes' in a range of flavours at birthday parties and weddings. Above right: The Rancan twins 'doga' classes are in great demand.



goodies, which start at \$6.90 a day, are then delivered and stashed in owners' fridges and pantries up and down the eastern seaboard.

CEO and co-founder Craig Silbery says he launched ilume as a love letter to his own dogs. "Our pets are now clearly defined as part of our families and we've developed ilume to give us even longer time with them."

Owners don't simply want better food for their dogs, however, they want better connections too. Lisa and Adele Rancan – the twins from the Rancan Sisters, once famous for their leotard and leggings workouts on *Good Morning Australia* – have been teaching doga (yoga with your dog) for years but have found their skills in even greater demand post-COVID.

"Some upmarket hotels such as The Langham, Bannisters and Ovolo now allow pets to stay with 'parents' and organise through us to have a doga session at the hotel," says Lisa. "Now workers have returned to workplaces, many businesses are more relaxed about allowing dogs in and a couple have asked us to do doga sessions."

"We also get booked for council events like Bark in the Park and have a few people who book us for dog parties. Our customers are usually quite a young crowd – there are lots of couples putting off having children or deciding not to have them at all

and getting four-legged ones instead."

Doga, says Lisa, releases happy hormones in both humans and dogs. Owners can hold little dogs while they do the moves or keep a caressing hand on bigger ones. Dogs also receive a massage to the ears – the canine equivalent of reflexology, apparently – and to tight hips and shoulders.

While dogs get the best-friend moniker, they're not the only companion animal getting extra attention, as Jules dos Santos' Luxury Cat Lodge on the NSW Central Coast proves. Each room has plush furniture, wall-mounted scratching posts and shabby-chic fittings. Some even have their own verandah with views. There's provision for cats to sleep perched up on shelves, in cosy dens on the floor or on comfy sofas, and when they've finished cat napping a jungle gym is available for exercise. Jules also has a second luxury cattery, Divine Creatures, in Willoughby, NSW.

Jules combines her luxury cattery with a charity to rehome surrendered cats and is also a cat psychologist, a passion she hopes will prevent cats with poor behaviours being surrendered in the first place. Feline thinking is usually summed up with the old adage that dogs have owners and cats have staff. What does Jules know about cats we don't?

"Cats are grossly misunderstood,"

Furry friends



Clockwise from below: Craig Silbery created canine catering company ilume out of love for his dogs; the Luxury Cat Lodge features plush furnishings; restaurant quality food.



Australia is now home to pet death doulas, who help ease the pain of a final goodbye, and pet celebrants, who hold farewell memorials with flowers, readings, doves and music – Queen’s *You’re My Best Friend* is a favourite, according to Melbourne celebrant Roslyn McFarlane, who has

she replies. “They can suffer from anxiety, depression, rejection, remorse and grief. They’re incredibly emotional and don’t like change and that’s where 95 per cent of problems come from. I’ve even had cats distressed by a change in furniture.”

Jules admits she was concerned there might be a wave of post-COVID dumping of pets but the RSPCA confirms this is not the case. “People seem to have bonded with their animals and take their responsibility very seriously,” she says, a claim backed up by vets who, in regional and rural areas especially, report they’ve struggled to keep up with demand as more people obtained companion animals.

Jules’ main concern now is cat separation anxiety as their owners return to work. “That has been a

surprise to me,” she admits – although not to Glenn Druery, who says his cat, Gus, never wants to be left home alone. Incredibly, Gus is so determined to be with Glenn that he goes swimming with him (in the sea!), jogs alongside him on the beach, sits on his shoulders when he cycles and joins him on kayaking and sailing expeditions.

Fascinated children see Gus out in Sydney Harbour and ask: “Is that a cat?”

“I tell them: ‘No, he’s a Siamese crossed with a poodle. He’s a Catadoodle or a Poocat,’” laughs Glenn. “Everything is crossed with a poodle these days so more than 50 per cent believe me.”

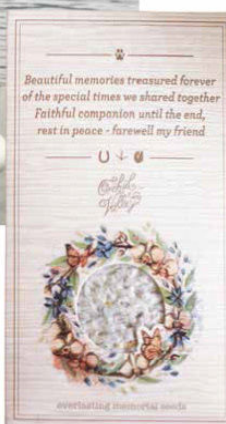
It stands to reason that these increased bonds between people and pets make their eventual passing tougher to deal with as well.

also conducted a pet wedding (there’s a jaw-dropping array of tuxedos and dresses available from Smoochy Poochy or Pets Charming, among others).

Meanwhile, WA farmers’ wives and best friends Jahna Trethowan and Zoe Ednie-Brown have gone all-out to ensure the most dignified exit for pets. Their story began when “crazy pet lady, Zoe, went to the vet with her beloved guinea pig, Tex, who had lymphoma,” explains Jahna. “She happened to ask the vet what would happen if Tex died, and it was really uncomfortable because it turned out they’d wrap him up in a black bag or old towel before sending him off for cremation, or presenting him back to her.”

Having lavished huge amounts of both care and cash on Tex, Zoe wasn’t

Furry friends



From left: Glenn with Gus the Siamese out on a paddleboard; Jahna creates 'forever beds' for deceased pets; celebrants hold farewell memorials.

happy, and she knew other pet lovers must feel the same. So, she and Jahna created "forever beds" – elegant white body bags with a latte-coloured handle and a blanket lining. They come in all sizes to fit anything from a Great Dane to a small bird and, for those who want their pets' final resting place to be in the garden, they're biodegradable. Since we may not be able to anticipate the death of a pet, they're sold wholesale to vets all over Australia. "It's nicer for the owner and the vet staff," observes Jahna.

The women's Orchid Valley Pet Co., now run by Jahna alone, also provides everlasting seed cards, so pet owners can plant wildflower memorial seeds for their pet, plus a variety of keepsake boxes, memorial headstones, photo frames, pendants and candles.

"I don't know why someone hasn't done this before," Jahna says. "You can't go putting your gorgeous pets into garbage bags."

Of course, some people can't bear to say goodbye to their pets at all. While pet cloning isn't available in Australia, owners have apparently been making

use of services overseas. With bank-breaking price tags of \$70,000 for a dog, a cheaper (though undeniably less lively) option is a visit to Markus Michalowitz from Downunder Taxidermy on the Sunshine Coast.

Grief-stricken pet owners from around Australia send him around 200 dead pets a year to be immortalised through taxidermy. His subjects are mainly cats and dogs but also guinea pigs, ferrets, birds, rabbits and even a goat.

The process involves removing fat and organs, making a customised framework to support the pet in its chosen pose, then freezing it and placing it in a special, sealed vacuum chamber where it remains for the next two to five months, depending on size.

Markus generally recommends preserving the pet in a lying down pose. "That way it's easier to accept and live with. You can look at it and think it's having a snooze. Some people do want their pet positions just so though – a paw over the nose

or the head at an exact angle."

With prices starting from \$1200, some customers only want a paw preserved or a skull cleaned and returned. One even wanted a cushion made from their cat's pelt.

"We look after everyone," says Markus, pragmatically. "Our customers come from all walks of life. We get older people who don't want another pet because they know they'll outlive it but still want something to hold and touch. Others just need a bit more time to let them go, while some want their pet preserved then placed in a casket so they can be buried or cremated with them when they die."

Not surprisingly, Markus also has to be something of a counsellor. "They all want to talk," he says. "But I must be doing something right. I have a few repeat customers who say the other pets I've preserved are still with them, sitting in the corner of their room. They're there forever if you look after them."

In death as in life, it seems, our love for our pets knows no bounds. **AWW**