

Helping People Help Pets:

PAWS NY Keeps Pets and Seniors Together

By Kathleen M. Reilly

There's no doubt this year has been difficult for all of us. But amid the challenges, most of us have been able to find the silver linings—among them, the bountiful joy and love our pets bring us every day. A relaxing walk with a dog or a snuggle with a cat can help ease so much of the stress of the outside world and help combat loneliness. Our pets are a vital part of our lives and our well-being.

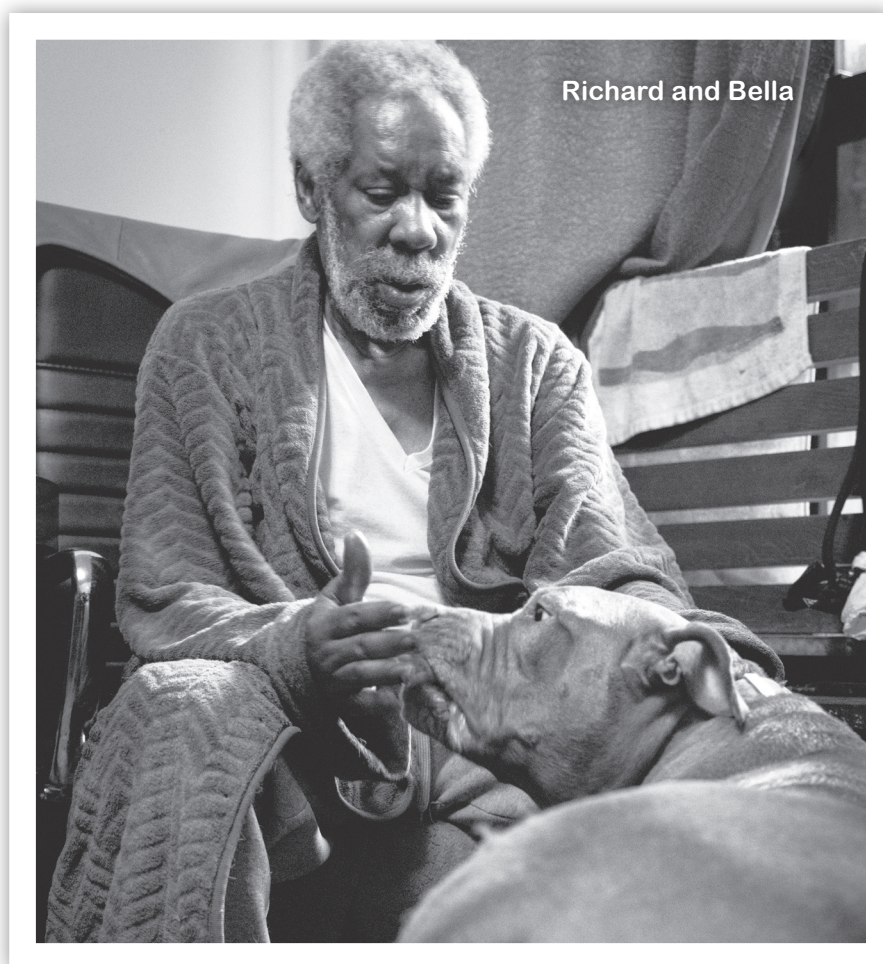
That's why, in 2008, when Rachel Herman kept seeing a young homeless couple with their dog on her walk to classes in New York City, she couldn't help but think about the sacrifice the couple undoubtedly made on behalf of their dog. "I started thinking about how homeless shelters didn't allow pets, and that on winter nights, they were giving up the opportunity for a little bit of comfort—a warm bed—by choosing to stay outside with their dog," she says. "Their dog was so important in their lives."

Although Rachel started to give money and pet food to the young couple whenever she could, she began expanding her view. "I kept asking myself, 'Who else here in New York City has pets that they love, who benefits from an animal companion, but who may be struggling day-to-day for pet care?'" she says.

That's how PAWS NY was born.

Keeping Furry Friends Close

Rachel founded PAWS NY to provide assistance to seniors in New York City



who were facing illness or disability but who had beloved pets living with them that they needed to care for. The organization provides "housecall," pet pantry, and foster care programs, as well as help accessing and affording veterinary care through partnerships with local veterinarians. PAWS NY also offers outreach and professional assistance to senior pet parents. A vast army of volunteers throughout the city helps keep pets and seniors connected.

The Housecall Program is the special backbone of PAWS NY. "We provide in-home, physical assistance to seniors, performing tasks that are so easy for many of us, like dog walking, changing kitty litter, or putting out food or water," Rachel says. "But for seniors who may have limited mobility, even things like bending down can be a challenge. I don't want people putting their own health and well-being at risk to provide for their pet, so our volunteers

Barbara and Otis



are vital to helping remove those barriers to keep pets in their homes.”

In addition, PAWS NY offers fostering for pets when a medical issue means that their pet parent can’t care for them temporarily. And the organization’s Pet Pantry program collects and distributes pet food and supplies. What’s more, having routine check-ins with seniors and their pets allows volunteers and staff to keep an eye on the pets’ health as well.

“We can easily observe a pet over time to see if their behavior is changing or if they may need veterinary care,” says Rachel. PAWS NY provides transportation to veterinary visits for wellness exams and vaccinations to ensure the pets in the program are healthy and picks up any prescriptions the animals need. “We’re there to be another set of eyes, to catch any early signs of illness or other issues that should be kept ahead of,” she says.

Staying Connected

When the coronavirus pandemic began and social distancing and travel restrictions became mandatory, Rachel and her team put hours into trying to find a solution that would keep everyone safe but still allow them to continue their mission. “In March, we had to suspend our Housecall Program,” she says. “Our volunteers make around 400 house visits every week. That was far too many touchpoints with too many people, and we needed to protect our clients, our volunteers, and our staff.”

Especially given the nature of the client base—a higher-risk population for the



Mary and Mia

virus—Rachel wasn’t comfortable putting anyone at risk. “The thought that a volunteer could unknowingly bring a virus in and expose our clients wasn’t something we could ever do,” she says.

PAWS NY staff and volunteers personally called every client, letting them know about the decision as well as connecting with them to determine if they each had a support system—someone who could not only help them with their pet, but also help check in to be sure the seniors themselves were OK.

Rachel’s team offered foster care as an option to each client to try to help keep everyone safe but cared for. “Not every client accepted it, which we completely understand,” says Rachel. “After all, now we were all in a period of increased isolation, and our pets are an important source of companionship. The thought of giving up their pet—even temporarily—when they needed them most was an incredibly difficult decision for [our clients].”

In addition to offering foster care, the PAWS NY team continues to provide transportation and financial assistance for veterinary care and helps clients get needed supplies. “We didn’t want our clients feeling like they had to leave their homes and increase risk of

exposure to buy pet food or kitty litter,” she says. “It’s been important to us to order food and supplies that are shipped directly to our clients so they can just open their door and have everything they need right there. We’re trying to help eliminate that worry and the financial burden too.”

Continuing the Mission

Rachel and her team continuously monitor the ongoing pandemic situation

to determine when they can resume their standard of care. “It’s difficult because everyone has a different threshold, even on personal levels,” she says. “The health and safety of our clients, volunteers, staff, and community are of course our ultimate concern, and until everyone feels comfortable and we’re sure there’s virtually no risk associated with our programs, we continue to have conversations to determine the best course of action.”

PAWS NY has been easing components of the programs back as they become safer. “We started allowing volunteers to do Pet Pantry deliveries, dropping off pet food without having direct contact, for example,” she explains.

Rachel says the pandemic has been tremendously difficult, but after 10 years of caring for New York City’s seniors and their beloved pets, she knows her mission is far too important to abandon. After all, she’s unwavering in her belief in the critical value of the comfort of a pet staying close by during tough times. “There’s too much at stake for us to turn our backs,” she says.

Kathleen M. Reilly is a writer and former dog trainer. She lives with her family and their giant, goofy Alaskan Malamute in North Carolina.