

Remember Pets When Estate Planning

By Ben Russell

What would happen to your pet in an emergency?

Two dogs in Fort Worth wandered the streets for months after their owner died until a Hurst woman spotted the pets.

"You know it's just somebody's pets who, one day, their person didn't come home," Geri Alexander said.

She has been caring for Ellie and Hannah at her home since July. She spotted an emancipated Ellie in a vacant lot beside a discount store along West Vickery Boulevard. After a few return trips with food, Alexander then spotted Hannah as well.

She coaxed the dogs into her car and took them to a veterinarian. At the vet, she discovered the dogs had been microchipped, which allowed her to determine who the rightful owner was.

Research revealed that the dogs' owner had put them in her backyard one morning, went to work and died of a heart attack at John Peter Smith Hospital.

With no nearby relatives or close friends to be concerned about the dogs, it appears that Ellie and Hannah escaped from their yard and lived on the streets, starving until Alexander found them.

In many homes, the beloved pet is treated as a valuable member of the family. But despite the fact that many people make plans to provide for their children and spouses in the event of their death, estate planning for pets is something not a lot of people consider.

"Unfortunately, it's probably the last thing a lot of people think about," said Guy Garner, an Arlington attorney who has handled pet estate planning. "But there's absolutely no reason why you can't have the same type of care that you would for any other person or property."

Estate planning for animals can involve something as simple as carrying a card with you that lists your pets' names and your wishes for how to care for them upon your death, Garner said. But it can also be as elaborate as establishing a trust fund that will provide the money to pay for their care and dictate instructions for their care.

In the meantime, Ellie and Hannah are getting lessons on how to be social.

"The bottom line is they're fearful of people," said Terri Elkins, a Taming the Wild Side dog trainer.

In time, the dogs will be suitable for adoption. Because of her own dog's temperament, Alexander is unable to provide a permanent home for them, she said.

"I think they'll make nice, nice dogs," Elkins said about her hope for the animals.