

# Local nonprofit offers hope to pet owners in need

Regina Young

Samantha the Shih Tzu was, as her owner put it, “that once in a lifetime dog.”

The “sweetest, most loving, most loyal” canine, little Sam first stole Marianne Iaquinto’s heart in 2001, and for the next 11 wonderful years, the Richboro resident and her husband remained as devoted to their furry companion as she to them.

“When she was about a year old, she started having health problems, and throughout her life she had a lot of problems,” Iaquinto said. “And we always said, thank God we have the means to provide all the care for her that she needed.”

But even though Iaquinto could afford Sam’s veterinary care, she couldn’t help but wonder: What would have happened if she hadn’t been so fortunate? What would have become of Sam if she had been surrendered to a shelter?

“She wasn’t adoptable because of her health issues,” Iaquinto said.

Sam, in fact, never faced this grim prospect, remaining in the loving care of her owners until she passed away in 2012. However, what was, in Iaquinto’s case, just a hypothetical – that of having to surrender a pet that is loved and dearly wanted – is, in reality, a heart-breaking decision some families are forced to make when they experience economic hardship. Deep bonds are also tearfully broken when some senior citizens – whose



*Doris and her dog, Lucy, receive home-delivered pet food and supplies through Sam’s Hope, a nonprofit organization that works to keep pets and their owners together.*

pets may be their only source of companionship – are no longer able to afford the cost of veterinary care or even pet food.

Seeking to prevent such painful separations from taking place, Iaquinto established Sam’s Hope, a nonprofit organization that works to keep cats and dogs with their owners. Begun shortly after the death of its canine namesake, Sam’s Hope serves residents of Bucks, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties and ultimately strives to save animal lives,

much like any animal welfare organization.

However, it functions differently than a traditional rescue group, the nonprofit’s founder said.

“A rescue generally goes to shelters and pulls animals out. My goal was to prevent them from going into the shelter,” Iaquinto explained.

“We’ve done some fostering, we’ve done some rehoming, but most of it is preventing that family from having to say, ‘Because of funds, because this animal has an illness, I am going to have to surrender.’”

Started in 2013, Sam’s Hope works to “keep pets and their people together” by providing pet food, covering the cost of veterinary care and extending in-home support to seniors and the homebound.

The organization’s pet food assistance program collects and distributes pet food to five food pantries in the Delaware Valley region, including Coordinating Council of Health and Welfare Emergency Food Cupboard in Warminster and Jesus Focus Ministry Food Pantry in Southampton. Individuals who live outside food pantry service areas can also apply for pet food assistance on the organization’s website.

The pet food assistance program has distributed 150,000 pounds of food and has helped feed approximately 12,000 pets, Iaquinto noted.

Sam’s Hope also funds medical

care for cats and dogs via veterinary assistance grants, which are determined and awarded based on financial need. In three years, Sam’s Hope has awarded 139 grants, which have covered the cost of several services, from small things like exams and vaccinations to life-saving veterinary care, Iaquinto said.

The nonprofit’s third program delivers pet food and supplies to the homebound and the elderly, who have been shown to experience a number of health benefits from owning a pet, including lower blood pressure and less frequent visits to the doctor, Iaquinto said.

“A senior pet owner, especially one that is homebound,” she said, “is four times less likely to be diagnosed as clinically depressed as nonpet owners. To me, that’s big.”

“And of course when they have a pet, they don’t feel so isolated. A lot of seniors, though they have children and grandchildren, don’t see them often. Their pet is often the only other thing they see during the week, besides the Meals on Wheels driver.”

One-hundred and forty-one animals have benefited from the Meals for the Pets of the Homebound and Elderly Program, though Iaquinto would like to expand the program’s reach by facilitating partnerships with other nonprofit organizations.

“Even though I love all of the programs, my pet project is the elderly program because their situa-

tions don’t get better,” Iaquinto said. “People get new jobs, they do better in life, but with the elderly, the situation doesn’t get better.”

Funding for Sam’s Hope stems from individual/business donations and grants. Organizations that have supported Sam’s Hope, either by hosting a pet food collection box, donating pet food or awarding a grant, include the Banfield Foundation, Athletes for Animals, DJ&T Foundation, Leo and Peggy Pierce Family Foundation, the McLean Contributionship, Murray’s Richboro Market (formerly Shop n Bag) and Wiggles n Wags Pet Services in Chalfont, which sponsors a holiday pet food drive every year.

With the help of the organization’s 21 volunteers and the support of community members, Sam’s Hope has assisted approximately 6,000 families – and this is just the beginning, the organization’s founder said.

“I always say to myself, ‘Oh my gosh, I need to get this bigger and better,’ but when I look back at what it was six months ago, a year ago, yes, it has grown. It really has,” Iaquinto said.

“But of course, I’m an impatient type,” she added. “I want to help more people and more animals.”

For information or ways to support Sam’s Hope, visit [samshope.org](http://samshope.org) or call 267-753-0510.

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