

15 MINUTES WITH: Kaleel Sakakeeny, an Ordained Animal Chaplain

ALESSANDRO CARRARA sat down with Kaleel Sakakeeny, an ordained animal chaplain and pet grief and bereavement counsellor, to find out more about his unique job occupation and the kind of services he offers to the world.

Having read the title of this article, you might be forgiven for scratching your head and wondering: what on earth is an animal chaplain? Perhaps your mind conjures images of a church filled to the brim with animals being blessed by said animal chaplain. Or perhaps the opposite, a dog kitted out in priest's robes leading the service.

As comical a scene as the imagination may produce, an animal chaplain is actually someone who serves human beings, in terms of grief support and prayer when their animal companion passes away. Kaleel Sakakeeny is one such person, and one of only very few in the world.

He was ordained in April last year, and is passionate about working closely with people who have suffered the “intolerable loss” of an animal companion, or had to make the “impossible decision” of ending the life of a being that has been their best friend.

However, he believes the bond that humans have developed with their animal companions only really came about in the last 50 years or so. “This kind of relationship with animals wasn't always the case. Previously, the dog was usually in the doghouse the cat was put out at night,” he adds. “But pets have affected us neurologically, socially, psychologically and emotionally. That bond has become very profound and very deep in recent times.”

He says the response and reaction to the loss of a pet can sometimes be “overwhelmingly more powerful than the loss of a family member”. Sakakeeny claims this comes down to the fact that the relationship between owner and pet is often “pure, unadulterated love”, in addition to “complete loyalty, trust and kindness”.

“That's what makes it doubly hard, as well as a lack of social facilitators and the social conventions that ease us from the process of pain and grief.” When an animal dies, “many people go to pieces”, and don't really have anyone to turn to. “The person is left in limbo, they don't have the rituals and guidelines that people normally do when a human being dies, such as a funeral or a ritual ceremony. “How much can you actually talk about your feelings with people who don't quite grasp it?”

This is the gap that Sakakeeny wanted to fill, and he says the ordination was the next “logical and spiritual step to take” to fully support pet owners. “That's what made me really feel that I was looking at something much more profound and far more mystical and spiritual than simply just the death of an animal and consolation.

“That's what moved me into the level of studying a lot of spiritual components, the relationship with the bible to animals and that then led me to the ordination as animal chaplain.”

THE PROCESS

Sakakeeny says people typically hear about him through word-of-mouth and he is usually contacted by email first, but will occasionally receive urgent phone calls from distressed pet owners as well. “The first contact is always that plea for help, and the support they need isn't something they're going to get from a therapist, because most therapists are simply not trained in the profound nature of loss,” he adds.



Sakakeeny says: “I am kind of the first and last person that people who are going through that loss can turn to. The connection with the person will be intense for the first few days, even two or three weeks. But as they heal, and the pain softens we stay in touch occasionally, usually if they have any questions such as getting a new pet.”

Sakakeeny's Facebook page, Pet Grief Help & Counseling, is filled

with testimonials of him helping people cope with their grief. “When we lost our Ebbie this past summer, we felt so empty and heartbroken. Not only was her passing unexpected but we felt guilt-ridden that we could've prevented her death from happening. Kaleel was amazing with his soothing and kind words of healing and self-forgiveness. He speaks from the heart with sincerity and depth and I truly felt hope for my healing process to begin once I accepted his words,” Maura Stevens posts on the site.

Meanwhile, Michael K Yearout, says: “The incredible understanding Kaleel has of what we all go through when we lose a beloved pet and is able to help you through the grieving process. He is truly blessed.”

Sakakeeny stresses that he never tries to fix anything, and instead attempts to affirm people's grief and explain that what they're feeling is “perfectly normal”. Additionally, he makes it clear to them that grieving and mourning are two separate things. “Grief is the response we make to deep loss, mourning is the external process by which we externalise the grief through ceremony. Whatever gets the feelings out of us and aids with the healing process,” he explains.

Sakakeeny also doesn't charge for his services. Initially, there was a fee for his work, around \$50 – \$90 an hour, but he says it “did not work at all”. “It was the last thing those people needed to hear during their grief. It just didn't work, so I vowed never to charge, but to ask for donations instead.”

Additionally, despite being based in the United States in Boston, Sakakeeny says he offers his personal, face-to-face support by phone, Skype or email to anyone in the world who needs it, even in the UK. He can be reached at kaleel@animaltalksinc.com or 617-818-1432.

LOOKING AHEAD

Sakakeeny says he has three goals for the year ahead, the first of which is making as many people as possible aware that this service is available to them, and offering reassurance that there is no “complex way of accessing it”.

His second goal is to continue to work as “passionately” as he can in conjunction with other animal rights and welfare organisations, as well as continuing his educational work teaching the difference between animal welfare and animal rights. Finally, his third goal is to work with faith leaders to get them to understand that including animal sanctions in their work and in their prayers and services can “only uplift their congregations and add dimensions to the worship process”.

“Through all of this I want to make it clear that my services are there for people, and that at a social, psychological and spiritual level they do not have to go through this pain alone. So the more people that know that and can feel that relief and sense of comfort, the better,” he concludes.