

'Best friends' stay close, their ashes enshrined in artworks made of glass

BY NICK GRABBE STAFF WRITER
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Jane Giat, left, and Deb Brown display examples of glass pet memorials at their business, Art From Ashes, in Amherst.

AMHERST - Mourning the death of a beloved canine companion? Now for \$325 you can buy a walking stick with a handmade glass top that contains some of your dog's ashes.

For \$275 the ashes can be used in the creation of a 3 1/2-by-2 1/4-inch perfume bottle, and for \$145 you can remember Rover with a 2 1/2-by-1 1/2-inch glass heart sculpture made in part with his "cremains."

Art From Ashes is a new business started by three local women who sell "handcrafted pet remembrances." Working out of an office in downtown Amherst, they take orders - and ashes - from dog-lovers and convey them to glass sculptors.

"People have all kinds of different approaches to what's emotional to them," said Jane Giat, of Pelham. "Grief is an individual thing, and people need to process it and feel it is validated in a way that's meaningful to them."

Along with Deb Brown, of Amherst, and Jennifer Bourgeois, of Wilbraham, they have sold 27 pieces of artwork so far. Most have included dog ashes, though three have been made with human cremains and one with ashes from a horse's leg.

There are companies that use cremated human remains to make fireworks, oil paintings, even

Frisbees. For a fee, ashes can be scattered from high-altitude balloons, shot into space and incorporated into diamond jewelry. A Georgia company even mixes human ashes with cement to form habitats for sponges and ocean coral.

But the three women, who have eight dogs and 12 birds between them, did some research and couldn't find a service that specialized in using pet ashes for artwork. They do most of their business on their Web site (www.artfromashes.com) and have had inquiries from as far away as England and California.

One customer wrote that "Louie went sailing," after her husband took the small sculpture made from Louie's ashes out on a boat. Another person told them she had kept her dog's ashes in a coffee can in the kitchen cabinet for six years. Another dug up the ashes she'd buried in the yard years ago.

A customer said her mother's ashes had been in a bureau drawer for 12 years. Now that the ashes have been used to create a glass sculpture that sits on her windowsill, she feels like her mother is still with her, Brown said.

When customers place online orders, they receive in the mail a "remembrance kit." This includes two plastic bags for the ashes, a disposable spoon and a Priority Mail envelope.

The instructions say to put a teaspoon of ashes in the plastic bag and mail it back to Art From Ashes.

The ashes go to glass artist Robert Burch, of Putney, Vt., and within a month the customer receives the finished work. They hope to offer jewelry by Martha Proctor, of Pelham, this summer.

Giat, a former psychiatric social worker, said our society doesn't fully accept the importance of grieving for a lost pet.

"I think it's the last frontier in what we need to help people with," she said. "Any loss brings up prior losses we've had that we haven't resolved. When people hear what we do, it stirs up childhood memories of pets and what they meant to them."

They have promoted their service everywhere from last weekend's Northampton Schools Dog Show to the Beverly Hills Pet Hotel and Day Spa. They've sent letters to local veterinarians. One puts their brochure with the animal's ashes when owners come to pick them up, while another has it in the waiting room.

Incorporated into the company's logo is a drawing of a phoenix, a symbol of immortality. Their slogan is "When someone you love becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure."

People often do a double take when they first hear about the business, Giat said. But when they understand that it is more compassionate than grisly, they are curious about the details, she said. Some cultures have special rules about cremated remains. Catholics are not supposed to separate out parts of human ashes, and Japan won't tolerate ashes being sent through the mail, Giat said.

There's something about a dog's nonjudgmental love, physical contact and quiet presence that affects many people profoundly, she said.

"Dogs can read you," Giat said. "Their intimacy extends beyond human boundaries. It's a nonverbal, visceral friendship."