

Older Adults and Animal Companionship

RMIT University and Cherished Pets
Pilot Study

DECEMBER 2020



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Executive Summary

Cherished Pets (CPF) is a charity committed to supporting the lives of older adults through animal-human centred approaches to care and independent living. The organisation also supports research into understanding the role that companion pets play in improving the lives of vulnerable people. The need for animal companionship was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic in which the wellbeing of older adults living alone and social exclusion became a key concern.¹ During this time, the role of animal companionship for enhancing the wellbeing of older adults—from social inclusion to physical exercise—has become highly visible and significant.

From July to October 2020, we connected with CPF beneficiaries and volunteers to explore their experiences, perceptions and practices. The aim of the exploratory study was to reflect on the significant value of animals in the lives of older adults, and the important role of CPF in facilitating these experiences. We combined ethnographic interviews with digital storytelling to elicit creative ways for collecting older adult participants' stories. We sought not only to collect stories from the community about the value of CPF but also facilitate research translation to raise public awareness. Learnings from this fieldwork will be taken into the place-making game, *Pet Playing for Placemaking (PP4P)*, funded by a Give Where You Live community grant.²

The pilot study focused on storytelling as an important part of how we make sense of the world. Storytelling, during the pandemic, became even more crucial as a technique to foster connection for those experiencing much uncertainty and anxiety. In the stories of hope and resilience, companion animals have been a prominent feature. Social media feeds filled with dogs, cats and birds bringing joy to their humans in lockdown. At the present moment, the value of animal-human companionship is uncontested and public awareness is high. However, we need further research that evidences these values and positive effects in the lives of older people, while also considering how the public can become involved in supporting more sustainable systems for ageing in place (at home). Cherished Pets plays an important role in this area.



¹ *Ageing Well (in a changing world) Report (2020)* Commissioner for Senior Victorians. www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/commissioner.

² This game will be led by Jacob Sheahan in collaboration with CPF as part of a Give to the place you Live community grant.

Introduction: Older adults and animal companionship during COVID-19

The physical isolation of COVID-19 restrictions have impacted greatly on all aspects of society—especially on the vulnerable. For many isolated older adults, animal companions played a key role in supporting their social and emotional wellbeing. Previous studies into isolated older persons have shown that companion animals, visiting animals and animals specifically used in therapeutic contexts increase wellbeing and connection.

The importance of animal companions during the pandemic is undisputed. During the lockdown restrictions, they often dominated our social media feeds. As restrictions eased, they became conspicuous in public spaces. We are at an important time in which we can deploy this new public awareness of animal companionship for wellbeing to give visibility and support to the important work done by CPF for the community. This report captures the experience of some of the key members of the community and how they value CPF.

For five years, CPF has played a vital role in the Geelong community by addressing the importance of pets in older adults' lives, to help with not just **social inclusion** but **social connection**. During the COVID-19 pandemic, CPF have witnessed first-hand the significance of pets in enhancing the lives of older adults—particularly those living alone. While other age cohorts might be embracing technology to address social isolation, there is an uneven uptake of technology among older people. In particular, if there are no grandchildren or children to help with digital literacy, the motivation is low.

CPF Volunteer

“ISOLATION IS TOUGH WHEN YOU LIVE ON YOUR OWN AND DON'T HAVE AN EXTENDED NETWORK OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS.”

Due to the extreme risk COVID-19 infection poses to the elderly and vulnerable pet owners that CPF supports, CPF in-home community pet care volunteer visits were suspended in early April and in-home veterinary services were modified to be contact free. During this time, CPF worked hard to develop workarounds to ensure its community still felt supported. Much of our pilot study was conducted during this period in which uncertainties around the pandemic emerged.

This report contextualises engagement with key community members including CPF beneficiaries. This preliminary research has led to the development of a creative intervention, a game, that will aim to enhance place-making and community engagement through animal-human visibility and literacy. Led by PhD student, Jacob Sheahan, *Pet Playing for Placemaking* (PP4P) will embed pet responsibility as part of place-making game play (as is used in the augmented reality game *Pokémon GO*, for example) via the placement of digital artefacts (QR codes) and stickers around the local town of Ocean Grove. As games for change scholar Colleen Macklin notes, games can help to enhance and change society for the better. They can help to build collaboration, trust and empathy as well as new ways for codesigning the world. The PP4P project seeks to use learnings about social connection and inclusion from the pandemic to build a better society in which caring for our older adults and their companion animals are central.

CPF Beneficiary

“MY DOG LOOKS FORWARD TO THE VOLUNTEER COMING. WE ARE A SMALL HOUSEHOLD. I AM WORRIED, I AM OLDER, I HAVEN'T BEEN OUT. I MISS THE VOLUNTEER VISITING.”

³ Hughes, M.J., Verreynne, M.L., Harpur, P., & Pachana, N.A. (2020). Companion animals and health in older populations: A systematic review. *Clinical Gerontologist*. (accepted 31/07/2019) DOI: 10.1080/07317115.2019.1650863; Enders-Slegers, M.-J. & Hediger, K. (2019) Pet Ownership and Human-Animal Interaction in an Aging Population: Rewards and Challenges, *Anthrozoös*, 32:2, 255-265; Wells, D.L. (2019) The State of Research on Human-Animal Relations: Implications for Human Health, *Anthrozoös*, 32: 2, 169-181, DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2019.1569902

Methods

From July–October 2020 we began with eight interviews with participants in the CPF community—including beneficiaries and board members. Before the interviews, participants sent through pictures of their animal companions in everyday scenarios. The pictures offered a digital storytelling dimension to guide the interview discussion around everyday practices.

We have given all participants pseudonyms to protect their identity. These stories are about capturing the value of animal companionship for older adults and the important role played by CPF in facilitating these relationships. As the pandemic has taught us, animal companions are key social connectors as well as crucial supports in the physical and social wellbeing of our older adults.

Stories from the field: The value of CPF from beneficiaries, volunteers and community members

Drawing from interviews with participants, we have designed this section to highlight the contexts and lived experience dimensions. Through a series of vignettes, we introduce each community participant and their stories about the value of CPF and animal companionship for older adults more generally.



BERNARD AND JUNE

80-year-old married couple Bernard and June have lived in Ocean Grove for two decades. Being active in the community is an important part of their life—this includes supporting initiatives such as the Men’s Shed. In particular, Bernard sees the value of animal companions in the lives of older adults and has been an active Cherished Pets Board member. His Golden Retriever, Abby, is a rescue dog and valued member of the family. Bernard and June speak fondly of Abby’s daily rhythms and habits. If it is getting close to 5pm and Bernard isn’t getting ready for their daily walk, Abby reminds him. Bernard treasures his walks with Abby—she has helped him discover locations in Ocean Grove he wouldn’t have found without her. Walking with Abby helps him connect to the place and community. Bernard speaks with great gratitude about having Abby in his life. He wouldn’t exercise as much if she wasn’t there to remind him daily. As Bernard highlights, dogs play an active role in connecting the family and community in different ways. When out for walks, Abby connects with other dogs and people in ways that are joyful and teaches us how to appreciate and be in the moment.

Bernard, CPF member,
on having a dog and
exercising

“I WOULDN’T BE GOING FOR A WALK EVERY NIGHT, NO. YEAH, I’M SURE THAT’S THE CASE. THIS IS INTERESTING BECAUSE ACTUALLY YOU CAN’T QUITE JUDGE THE SPEED BUT THEY’RE GOING A FAIRLY FAST CLIP THERE. AND WHAT SHE LIKES TO DO AFTER SHE MEETS A DOG, IS TO RUN AROUND IN CIRCLES. LOVES TO LEAD THE OTHER ONE AROUND IN CIRCLES.”

“I SAID TO A WOMAN THE OTHER DAY WHEN ABBY WENT UP TO HER, “I THINK MY DOG LIKES PEOPLE BETTER THAN OTHER DOGS.”. AND THE WOMAN TURNED TO ME AND SAID, “MMM, I LIKE DOGS BETTER THAN OTHER PEOPLE.”

June, on dogs and socialising

Margaret, Beneficiary, on CPF

"WELL CHERISHED PETS IS AN INCREDIBLE ORGANISATION. AND THE VET, ALICIA, WHO STARTED IT ALL, SHE'S NEVER GOING TO BE WEALTHY BECAUSE SO MUCH OF HER MONEY AND TIME GOES BACK INTO CHERISHED PETS. SHE DOES SUCH A LOT FOR EVERYONE. AND IT REALLY IS AN INCREDIBLE ORGANISATION."

MARGARET

CPF beneficiary Margaret is a petite woman in her 80s. Her German Shepherd Bessy is almost as big. Margaret is active in the U3A community including teaching Spanish. During the pandemic she has learnt how to use Zoom which has allowed her to keep doing some of her community activities. When we meet Margaret she has just come back from visiting her family in NSW just as the border shut due to lockdown. Margaret and Bessy have a loving relationship. Bessy is a gentle and quiet giant dog that loves her balls. Margaret shows us some pictures of Bessy—all with a ball in her mouth. Including while she is sleeping! Margaret has ongoing health issues which mean that sometimes she is unable to walk Bessy. This is when CFP volunteers Paul and Sam play an active role—taking Bessy out for a walk. Volunteer Paul has enjoyed getting to know Bessy so much he has now his own German Shepherd. Margaret's eyes light up when she talks about Bessy.



"I CAN'T IMAGINE LIFE WITHOUT A DOG. I DON'T UNDERSTAND PEOPLE NOT WANTING A DOG – UNLESS THEY'RE TRAVELLING, OR THEY HAVE A GENUINE REASON FOR NOT BEING ABLE TO COPE WITH ONE. BUT NOT HAVING ONE BECAUSE THEY THINK, "OH A DOG'S TOO MUCH WORK, TOO MUCH RESPONSIBILITY", OR WHAT HAVE YOU; THE REWARD FOR HAVING A DOG OUTWEIGHS ANY OF THE DISADVANTAGES BY A MILE. ABSOLUTELY."

Margaret, Beneficiary, on the importance of animal companionship

PENELOPE

69-year-old Penelope is a physically and socially active member of the Cherished Pets Volunteers. She is a vibrant character and owner of two Beagles, and loves walking dogs for older adults in the community. She has seen the pandemic as a time in which she and her Beagles can further bond—which she has loved. For Penelope, dogs have played a key role in her life but especially later in life when she made the bold "sea change" move to Ocean Grove away from her grown up family in Melbourne. She thinks CPF are saints and is proud to be part of their volunteer community. CPF highlight how important animals are to human wellbeing—especially for older adults. She is an avid Beagle owner, onto her fifth from Beagle Rescue.

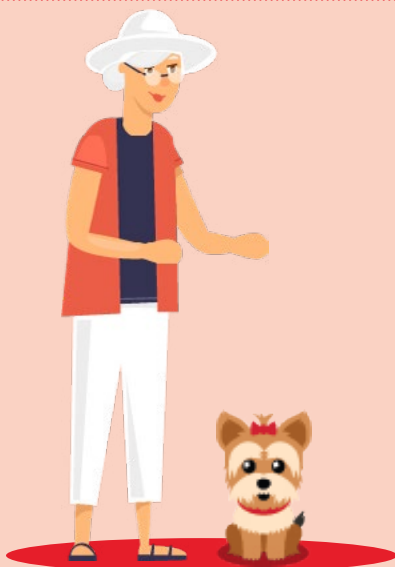


Penelope, volunteer

"HONESTLY, I'VE HAD DOGS, CERTAINLY, BEAGLES, AND I'D BE LOST WITHOUT MINE, WHETHER WE'VE GOT COVID OR NOT, BUT PARTICULARLY WITH COVID, BECAUSE ALL THE OTHER THINGS THAT I DO AROUND TOWN I'M NOW NOT DOING, OBVIOUSLY, SO IT'S JUST THE GIRLS, AND WE'RE LOVING IT."

Julie, volunteer

"I HAVE VOLUNTEER WALKED FOR THREE LOVELY LADIES AND THEIR LITTLE DOGS. OVER THE YEARS I CONNECTED WITH THESE LADIES ON A PERSONAL LEVEL. ENJOYING CHATS AND CUPS OF TEA, CHATTING ABOUT LIFE EXPERIENCES, INTERESTS, AND LOVE OF DOGS."

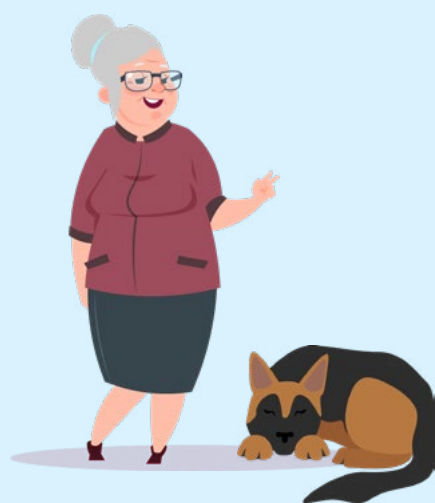


JULIE

Grandmother Julie is a passionate school teacher who understands only too well the power of animal companions for human wellbeing. She leads a program of Story Dogs—a literacy program developed from the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) which began in Utah in 1999—to encourage literacy and reading in younger people. The program has young people reading to dogs as way to build confidence and enjoyment around reading. Julie has been connected with Cherished Pets for many years, since her granddaughters spoke of a vet, Dr Lizzie (CPF vet) that had attended their local primary school. Dr Lizzie had talked about her journey of becoming a vet, how to behave around dogs and to recognise their body language, which was great as at that time Julie's grandchildren were a little afraid of dogs. After that, when Julie attended a local function, Dr Lizzie was the guest speaker. She spoke about her newly formed foundation and the importance of human-companion pet bonds. This struck a chord with Julie as she had gained comfort from her rescue dog through some difficult times, so she volunteered. She has volunteered to support three women and their pets, who have become an important part of her life.

"THROUGH MY CONNECTION WITH THESE LADIES (BENEFICIARIES) AND MY OWN EXPERIENCE WITH FAMILY DOGS I SEE THE WONDERFUL BENEFITS OF COMPANION PETS. THEY GIVE A PURPOSE TO THE DAY, A RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR CARE AND GIVE AND RETURN LOVE. WHEN A CLIENT NEEDS ASSISTANCE WITH THEIR PET'S CARE, IT'S WONDERFUL THAT THE CPF TEAM CAN PROVIDE THE CARE AND THE PET CAN SAFELY REMAIN WITH ITS OWNER. THE CLIENTS ARE SO GRATEFUL FOR THE ASSISTANCE. I HAVE HAD MANY REWARDING EXPERIENCES THROUGH VOLUNTEERING WITH CPF AND HAVE FORMED FRIENDSHIPS WITH THE OTHER CPF VOLUNTEERS."

Julie, volunteer



ELIZABETH

Volunteer walker Elizabeth first became aware of CPF when her German Shepherd was a puppy and she met a CPF walker on a dog walk. That dog walker ended up adopting the dog after its owner passed away. The organisation (CPF) "sounded really great" and as her daughter was moving overseas this gave Elizabeth more time to volunteer. Volunteering for CPF she has seen firsthand how they treat older adults and their animal companions with dignity and respect. During the pandemic Elizabeth has also witnessed how it has been difficult for older adults in the community and the vital role CPF have played in addressing these challenges. She told us about her important support of an older couple and their dog and how the experience deeply enriched her life. The experiences also reminded her of the significant role animals play in the lives of older adults.

Elizabeth, volunteer

"I COULDN'T SPEAK MORE HIGHLY OF CPF VOLUNTEERING. I THINK IT'S FABULOUS. I THINK IT'S A VERY KIND, GENUINE, GOOD THING TO DO FOR PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY, PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE PEOPLE."

"SOMETIMES FOR THE BENEFICIARIES, THE DOG IS THE REASON THEY GOT UP IN THE MORNING AND IT WAS PART OF THEIR ROUTINE. AND I GUESS FOR ME WATCHING IT YOU REALISE THAT LIFE'S SHORT AND IF I'M ABLE TO HELP PEOPLE THAT REALLY NEED HELP IT'S NOT A TAXING. AND I GUESS IT MADE ME FEEL BETTER AS A PERSON AND I PROBABLY DIDN'T THINK I'D GET THAT MUCH OUT OF IT. I THOUGHT IT WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO. I LOVE ANIMALS AND I'M ALWAYS HAPPY TO HELP. THERE WAS JUST SOMETHING MAGICAL ABOUT IT (VOLUNTEERING). IT MADE ME STOP AND JUST LIVE IN THE MOMENT A BIT MORE AND ENJOY TIME TALKING TO PEOPLE ... IT WAS A REALLY HAPPY, ENJOYABLE TIME WHEN WE WERE TOGETHER AND I THINK WE ALL LOOKED FORWARD TO IT."

Elizabeth, volunteer

Gerard, CPF member

"JAKE'S REALLY THE MOTIVATION FOR WALKING. LIKE IT WAS RAINING YESTERDAY, AND WE WENT FOR A WALK OVER THE BRIDGE. NOW I'D NEVER DO THAT IF IT WASN'T FOR HIM, BUT I KNEW THAT HE NEEDED A WALK. SO, I WOULDN'T WALK A TENTH AS MUCH AS I DO WITHOUT HIM... NO DOUBT ABOUT THAT."



GERARD AND NATALIE

Gerard and his wife Natalie are in their sixties and live in Ocean Grove with Jake, a Kelpie-Blue Heeler cross they adopted from an elderly gentleman (one of CPF's first beneficiaries) when he moved into a nursing home. Jake is well-known about town and when they are out on walks people will often come up to greet them and stop for a chat. Jake is a big part of Gerard's life, and is "absolutely brilliant" with their eleven grandkids who often come for sleepovers. Three years back when Gerard's grandson Henry was diagnosed with a heart condition and spent three months in hospital, Gerard said he was pretty down and kept asking "Can you bring Jakey-boy in?" The hospital staff hooked up a portable monitor for Henry so he could go outside, and Gerard brought Jake in for visits, which really lifted Henry's spirits. Jake and Gerard are always together; Jake follows him around the house, hangs out in the garage where Gerard spends a lot of time "pottering about," and comes along whenever Gerard goes out—riding in the trolley at Bunnings and visiting Gerard's 94-year-old mum who always asks "are you bringing Jake today?" Gerard says he is way more active because of Jake, who he walks once or sometimes twice a day in the summer months. He often finds himself talking to Jake "as if he's another person" and deeply values their friendship. He believes dogs give many elderly people enormous comfort.

"I LIKE TO HAVE HIM THERE... THE ONLY TIME I'LL LEAVE HIM IS IF WE'RE GOING SOMEWHERE WHERE I LITERALLY CAN'T TAKE HIM. HE DOESN'T SLEEP IN OUR ROOM, BUT EVERY NIGHT HE'LL COME IN, I JUST HANG MY ARM OUT OF THE BED, JUST GIVE HIS HEAD A LITTLE PAT. AND THEN STOP, ONLY LASTS A FEW SECONDS, AND THEN HE'LL GO BACK TO HIS BED IN THE LOUNGEROOM".

Gerard, CPF member

Conclusion

During the pandemic, the value of our companion animals for wellbeing—from social inclusion to physical exercise—has been well documented. This is especially the case for older adults living alone.

This report has sought to capture the perceptions and experiences of the CPF community—including beneficiaries, volunteers and members. For many, CPF community engagement is an enriching, rewarding and fulfilling experience. The community recognises the significant value of human-animal companionship, and empathically and respectfully enables older people in caring for and keeping their non-human family members at home.

CPF is doing important work in the community supporting vulnerable older adults and their animal companions to lead lives of dignity and social inclusion. CPF's significance is captured in this report through the voices of beneficiaries, volunteers and members. And while the pandemic has brought into stark relief the integral role of animals for wellbeing and community engagement, more needs to be done in building evidence and raising public awareness about CPF's work in scaffolding familial and community care networks and infrastructure. We recommend a more substantial longitudinal study that explores and documents the myriad wellbeing factors more deeply, captures member narratives across a wider cohort, engages in public awareness initiatives to change attitudes and cultures around pet ownership, and considers how CPF's work could be integrated into government policies and systems such as My Aged Care.

