

Squirty was a very cool dog.



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Squirty loved his blankets. When the former stray died at 14, his owners had him cremated and held two visitations with his remains.

"He should have been a therapy dog," said Steve Cardwell, 39. He and his wife, Shawn, considered the scruffy little terrier mutt a "unique soul" and "our baby, basically."

"He was affectionate," explained the Fishers resident, who works in marketing. "He gave hugs -- he would throw his head on your body and look up at you."

The Cardwells first encountered a young Squirty when he "came calling" at their former home in Greenwood. He was a stray who, once taken in, demonstrated a profound, lifelong gratitude for life's simple pleasures food and the warmth of covers.

So when he succumbed to cancer recently at almost 15 years, wrapped in his favorite blanket, a broken-up Cardwell called the service he'd located a few weeks

earlier on the Internet: Pet Angel Memorial Center in Carmel.

To Cardwell's amazement, his call was answered personally by owner Coleen Ellis -- at 2:30 a.m. on a Sunday.

Since opening 18 months ago, Ellis has worked with about 600 grieving families, providing pick-up for the deceased, cremation, visitation in her stand-alone facility in a strip mall and grief counseling. Other amenities include an urn, a ceramic paw print and a souvenir of clipped fur.

Fees are based on the pet's weight -- for Squirty, at 19 pounds, the bill was \$175, including the urn.

Surprised by any aspect of this? You shouldn't be.

A pet industry that generated almost \$40 billion in 2005 caters to almost every aspect of life for a cherished dog from dog bakeries to day care. So why not death, with dignity and style?

No wonder Flanner & Buchanan Funeral Services, the largest funeral home in the state, last fall added pet cremation for clients -- and this spring will open a section of a cemetery for pet burial.

"People have such a love for animals," said Jerrit Clayton, 59, vice president of Flanner & Buchanan. "I have known for years and years that people wanted this."

Himself an animal lover, Clayton has "three of the most wonderful black cats" and formerly lived with Labrador retrievers. Times have changed, he said, from when he grew up in rural Indiana and dead dogs and cats simply "disappeared."

That's not acceptable today, he said. "I wanted to put dignity into their deaths, as we do for any loved one."

Ellis has worked in the funeral and cemetery industry since 1986. On March 16, she will be the keynote speaker at an international meeting of funeral directors in Las Vegas.

The trend, she said, is obvious.

"There are a lot of people like me who don't have children. Or people who do, but their pets are also their children." She refers to the deceased pets as "babies."

That sort of language is what won Cardwell over. "I knew if anybody in the world would understand that it was OK for a 250-pound man to cry over this, it would be her."

After all, Squirty was his baby.