



## Faithful family members

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Addrian Brooks in many ways lives the iconic gay lifestyle — he lives in Midtown, attends a number of events, and, like most gay people, his daughter has four legs instead of two.

Belle, the Cocker Spaniel that lives with Brooks and his partner, believes she's the center of the house, and between the manicures and professional photo sessions, she might be right.

"I certainly treat her as a member of the family, but I don't think it's overboard by any means," Brooks says. "Cocker Spaniels are the type of dogs that I think require an inordinate amount of attention."

Brooks admits Belle's begging is one of his soft spots and he's been known to give her a cupcake or two if she's been really good. Like a number of gay people, Brooks considers Belle more a family member than a pet.

Dr. Dionne Bates is an out lesbian counselor whose practice includes a large number of gay and transgender clients. She said pets offer LGBT people a source of unconditional love and support they might not get elsewhere.

"I may be a little biased because I have a 16-year-old son named Ricky, who has four legs," she says. "The community definitely has an allegiance to their pets. I have friends who have many, many, many pets and I think a lot of time it's about trying to find unconditional love, or combat loneliness, and that's good for mental health."

BY SAVING ANIMALS, people often save themselves a bit in the process. Herb Slate, a retired gay man who lives in Midtown, didn't want a pet for himself, but ended up with Hans, a 3-year-old Dachshund. Slate answered a Craigslist ad seeking a home for the abused dog. After the two got to know each other, Slate took Hans home, intending to give him away.

"One of my friends was looking for a dog, and I called him and couldn't get a hold of him and figured I'd go get him and give him to him," he said. "[My friend] came over two days later and I just said, 'Naw, you can't have him, I like him too much.'"

Robin Davis of Tucker is a founding member of Southeastern Greyhound Adoption. She helped start the group in 1997 and has adopted six Greyhounds and fostered more.

"Saving any dog is important, but Greyhounds, because they come from an industry, and I don't take an opinion on racing, but I think it's important that people step up with these animals," Davis says.

SEGA is constantly looking for more people willing to adopt and foster dogs because the organization gets their hounds straight from the track, and the ones they don't have spaces for are euthanized.

Davis said that gay people sometimes shy away from rescue agencies because they are afraid of the scrutiny that comes with adopting a hound, but she said that's not always the case.

"SEGA is a very accepting community, and I guess I'm a testament to that. I came out during the process of working with SEGA," she says. "There are a lot of gay people who are afraid that they'll be judged on that, but it's never been the case with SEGA — they've always been very accepting of people, regardless of who they are."

**AFTER CHRISTINE Hunsaker lost one of her dogs, Casey, in 2004, she was so distraught over the lack of options for pet burial that she formed Paws, Whiskers & Wags in Decatur to take care of four-legged family members after they die. Unlike**

other clinics, each pet is cremated alone instead of in a mass cremation, and owners are encouraged to take as much time as they need to deal with the loss.

“Until we arrived those things weren’t available,” says Hunsaker, who is gay. “We said, ‘Wait just a minute, this relationship and this bond is very important and the owners should have as much or as little involvement as they want.’”

When she first formed her company, most of Hunsaker’s clients were gay. And while she has expanded since then, gay families remain a core of her business.

Renee Palmer and Patsy McGirl are a lesbian couple whose love of their pets spurred them to create City Dog Market. The market focuses on natural foods and toys in a playful environment.

“I think the traditional information about how much we spend on our pets is pretty true because we don’t have kids that we have to send to college, so we do spend more money on our pets,” Palmer says.