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Issue: College Students Owning Dogs

By Daria Smith

“I usually got the impression that getting a dog was an impulsive decision rather than something the student had researched,” said Ansleigh Banks, GSU graduate student, pet owner and experienced vet technician. “Students are typically not the most affluent and try to invest as little money as possible in everything, including pet care.”

College students adopt dogs for a variety of reasons including stress relief, emotional support and companionship. However, there is an issue in which college students get dogs and do not take care of them.

Students often adopt dogs because they miss their family pets, want to start a new chapter in their lives and for companionship, said Banks. Owning a dog taught Banks to put another’s needs before her own, sacrifice, responsibility, time management and love.

However, students do not purchase essential preventatives to protect their dogs against heartworm disease, fleas and ticks, and then complain about the cost of treatment for an infection, said Banks. Investing \$15 to \$20 per month on preventatives prevents the animal from suffering and an expensive bill down the road, said Banks.

Banks also encounters situations in which students get puppies, do not vaccinate them and then parade them around the dog park or Petco, leaving the dog to contract Parvovirus (Parvo). Parvo can be fatal and treatment costs upwards of \$1,000 but can easily be avoided if puppies receive a series of four Parvo vaccines, which cost \$20 each and are administered every three weeks, said Banks.

“That being said, I’ve also seen many dogs who are well taken care of by their student owners, receiving all vaccines, preventatives, yearly checkups and costly life-saving surgeries when needed,” said Banks. “It depends on the situation, but overall, I am against college students owning dogs when it negatively impacts the animal.”

When many students move away to college, they get lonely and struggle with depression, anxiety or other mental health issues. Many students are comforted with the presence of having a pet and its companionship.

Stephen Bryan, GSU student, lives with a roommate who has a German shorthaired pointer, an active, sporting dog breed, named Hazel. Bryan’s roommate impulsively bought Hazel from a breeder for a good deal after being pressured by his ex-girlfriend.

“My roommate does not turn to his pet for emotional relief,” said Bryan. “Rather, his dog provokes emotional distress.”

There is nothing good about living with Hazel, as she is emotionally neglected and has destroyed our entire apartment, said Bryan. Hazel has eaten two iPhones, multiple wallets and a bottle of allergy medication and shattered a glass table within the past few months, which could have been avoided if Hazel was under supervision, said Bryan.

“While I love dogs, there are some people who do not need a dog,” said Bryan. “They need to learn how to take care of themselves before taking care of a dog.”

Summer Riddle, GSU student, lives with her twin sister who adopted a dog named Ivan from an Atlanta shelter. Riddle has had to make a few sacrifices to live with Ivan including when he pees on her bed and when he chewed up all of her makeup brushes when he was left unattended.

“After living with my sister’s dog, I have learned that I am not financially or emotionally ready to care for another being,” said Riddle. “While my love for animals has stayed strong, trying to be in college and have a dog live in my house has been one of the most stressful and annoying parts of my life at home.”

Ivan is Riddle’s twin’s companion and provides her with emotional support. Riddle has noticed an increase in her sister’s happiness since she adopted Ivan. That’s what truly matters, added Riddle.

“I think that college students should only have dogs if they are financially stable enough to give it a good life,” said Riddle. “Also, only if they have enough time to nurture and care for it. If not, they are doing an injustice to the animal.”

Many college students deal with high stress, loneliness, anxiety and depression, according to a 2017 report by the [American College Health Association](#). Dogs increase humans’ levels of oxytocin, a hormone that eases stress, decreases anxiety, cultivates kindness and improves social skills, according to a study published in the [Journal of Frontiers in Psychology](#).

Ashley Fenstermaker, GSU student, adopted a dog named Iver through the Bulloch County Humane Society. Fenstermaker recently had to re-home Iver to a loving family due to a job she took after graduation, but she recommends getting a dog in college.

“Dogs are great for emotional support and my puppy knew exactly when I was sad or overwhelmed and she would come comfort me by cuddling or licking away my tears,” said Fenstermaker. “Even though she didn’t have words to make me feel better, just her understanding that I wasn’t feeling great and wanting me to feel better was enough to help.”

Iver encouraged Fenstermaker to be healthier and more active on their frequent walks and occasional runs, and they both loved spending time together.

“I think, if college students are responsible and selfless, that getting a dog is a great idea,” said Fenstermaker. “Having a dog requires you to often think of your dog before yourself which can be a good way to develop an attitude of service in our world when many people just focus on themselves.”

Evie Bielen, University of Georgia student, rescued Rocky, an Australian shepherd mix, from a local humane society after wanting a dog “ever since she can remember.” Rocky relieves stress but also causes stress when he destroys things, said Bielen.

“Lots of my furniture is scratched, ruined and a lot of things have found their way to the trash after Rocky decided they’d be fun to chew,” said Bielen. “But Rocky has taught me unconditional love and how out of my way I will continuously go every single day for my tiny fur ball.”

Baxter Hunt, UGA student and Bielen’s boyfriend, has lived with numerous roommates who have dogs. Rocky cheers people up when they are down because of his cuteness and disregard for the world’s problems, remarked Hunt.

“Living with a dog has taught me to be more aware of something other than just myself,” said Hunt. “The experience has shown me how much it costs to own a dog and how much destruction they can cause. However, Rocky benefits me in that I have a companion when I would otherwise be alone at the house.”

Bielen spends almost all of her free time within proximity of the dog, said Hunt.

“Everything I do revolves around Rocky’s schedule,” said Bielen. “He is the reason I get out of bed each morning way before my alarm goes off.”

Bielen and Hunt both think that college students should have dogs if they have the time and financial responsibility to do so. My grandma always said, “If you can’t spoil a dog, then don’t get one,” said Bielen.

“I went through a period of time where I was suicidal and have never experienced that level of despair since getting Rocky,” said Bielen. “If I start to feel those emotions resurfacing, I remind myself of Rocky...who calms me down and gives me a huge reason to live.”

Across America, the number of emotional support animals (ESA’s) on college campuses continues to surge. GSU is no exception, as the number of ESA’s living in on-campus housing during the spring semester of 2018 set a new record with 26 registered ESA’s according to [The George Anne](#), GSU’s newspaper.

Josie Shay, vet assistant and Ogeechee Technical College student, has seen some college students with ESA’s. Owning a dog benefits students in times of emotional stress as a source of comfort, said Shay.

“Dogs can teach a great deal of responsibility, patience, time and money management,” said Shay. “They can also provide a sense of safety, companionship and loyalty that can sometimes be hard to find when you go to college.”

To get a dog verified as an ESA a student must have a written referral from a mental health professional detailing how owning a dog could benefit their mental health, said Shay. Most students said it was an easy process and that most mental health professionals will write this referral if asked, said Shay.

Kaylie Heard, GSU student, lives on campus with her ESA, Sunny, a dog who she rescued from a local shelter. In order for an ESA to live on campus, the Student Accessibility Resource Center requires a letter from a mental health professional, the animal's shot records and permission from the student's roommates, said Heard.

Animals are beings that need to be taken care of and aren't tokens to just post on social media as an accessory, which some students do not realize, said Heard. Keeping another being alive is a big responsibility, said Heard.

"When I got Sunny, my stepmom told me that once I adopt an animal, I am stuck with it," said Heard. "I can't give it away to anyone because I promised to take care of it until it passes one day and that's my responsibility...I don't think some college students hold on to that."

Eve Atkinson, GSU student, got Aspen, a certified ESA and female German shepherd mix, as a freshman while still living in the campus dorms despite her mother's direct disapproval.

Last summer, Atkinson lost two of her closest friends while living alone in the middle of nowhere where she knew no one. Getting Aspen saved my life, literally, and people who refuse to give dogs to college students are selfish, said Atkinson.

"Some of us have hearts that are open and so ready for a four-legged baby to pee on our beds, destroy our trash cans, eat everything and anything that's left out and spend thousands of dollars on our dogs if need be," said Atkinson. "That's what you do when you make a commitment at any age."

Some college students do not realize that getting a dog is a lifetime commitment, said Atkinson. However, Atkinson would never stop a college student from getting a dog unless she knew the individual "didn't have what it takes to put something above themselves."

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