

COMMUNITY

Annual Pet Remembrance Vigil postponed after tragedy

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A community-beloved event for grieving pet owners has been rocked by tragedy, requiring its postponement until 2025.

The Pet Remembrance Candle Lighting, usually held on March 5, has been a cherished Vallejo event since 2007, offering pet owners from far and wide a moment of connection through shared mourning.

When the vigil's in-person ceremony dropped away during the pandemic, a virtual candle was lit until the event could resume its original programming. After four years of gearing up for its return, Kathryn Marocchino, founder of Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets and the event's coordinator, was eager to bring on the treasurer from the Humane Society of the North Bay, Joseph Hayden. But the vigil's return was quickly foiled by a website crash, the beginning of "the perfect storm," Marocchino called it. While attempting to correct the site, Marocchino also learned of their pianist's passing two years prior. Tim Heney, a longtime contributor to the event, died in 2022 after fighting a long battle with cancer. Since he had lived alone, Marocchino didn't find out about it until she found his obituary online.

Hayden was also set to play a substantial part in this year's service until an accidental house fire drastically uprooted his life and tragically killed five of his own adopted dogs.

Having stepped out to help his neighbor adopt a dog, Hayden was only gone briefly when something went wrong involving an electrical socket on the deck, though the precise details are still under investigation.

Since many of his dogs were blind or deaf, it is assumed that they panicked and hid, ultimately passing from smoke inhalation. Capulet, Matty, Polar, Snowball and Pancho — the owner's "Hayden Five" — were all dogs given a second chance at life by Hayden. Two had come from a vet who refused to put them down, the youngest was a direct adoption from the humane society and the others were found on the streets of Vallejo.

"The only thing that gives me a little bit of solace is that I extended their lives beyond what would have otherwise been much shorter," Hayden said.

Though this personal tragedy has halted Hayden's ability to help run the ceremony on March 5, he is open to the idea of a memorial for his five later this year. "They were ambassadors for the humane society," he said, explaining that they were often present at fundraisers and photos with Santa where Hayden would play an elf.

"They were known by the community," he said, which explains the recent outpouring of love in the form of donations to the humane society.

Hayden's passion for adoption, as evidenced by his own pets, has always come from a place of societal harm reduction. "I try to maximize the length and quality of these animals who can't speak for themselves. These animals have no voice. If we don't speak for them, they aren't spoken for at all," said Hayden.

While no firm plans have been made for a rescheduled Pet Remembrance Vigil or a memorial for the Hayden Five, Hayden mentioned a tentative plan to implement a quarterly vigil to help people throughout the year. He is working with Kathryn and others as they look into a venue that would support that.

In the meantime, a resource for grieving pet owners can be found through the Nikki Hospice Foundation line. Those who call can ask for pet loss support provided by Marocchino as well as Dr. Sandy Grossman. Callers may call at any time and leave a message and they are ensured a response within 48 hours.

"Things come in waves," said Marocchino, reflecting on this year's turn of events. "We just have to roll with the punches and do the best we can."

The Nikki Hospice Foundation help line is: (707) 557-8595

The donation site for the Humane Society is: hsnb.org/donate