

► Sam's Hope provides veterinary grants for animals in need and also helps elderly owners care for their pets by providing food and supplies.

By Melissa Yerkov
Northeast Times

It was about one year ago to the day. Patricia Vertlieb was just released from the hospital — again — and settling into her Northeast Philadelphia apartment, excited to be back in her own bed after yet another medical emergency.

Vertlieb, who suffers from secondary progressive multiple sclerosis, lung disease and an array of other conditions, has spent the better part of a decade in and out of hospital rooms. After her latest stint in emergency care, she returned home, but not for long.

The day after she was released, Vertlieb passed out in her home on Welsh Road near Roosevelt Boulevard. By the time paramedics arrived, she had no heartbeat, no pulse. Due to complications with her medications, Vertlieb almost died.

But Coco wouldn't let that happen.

The 13-year-old Chihuahua has saved Vertlieb's life four times. During last year's episode, the service dog barked relentlessly until a neighbor checked on Vertlieb and called for help.

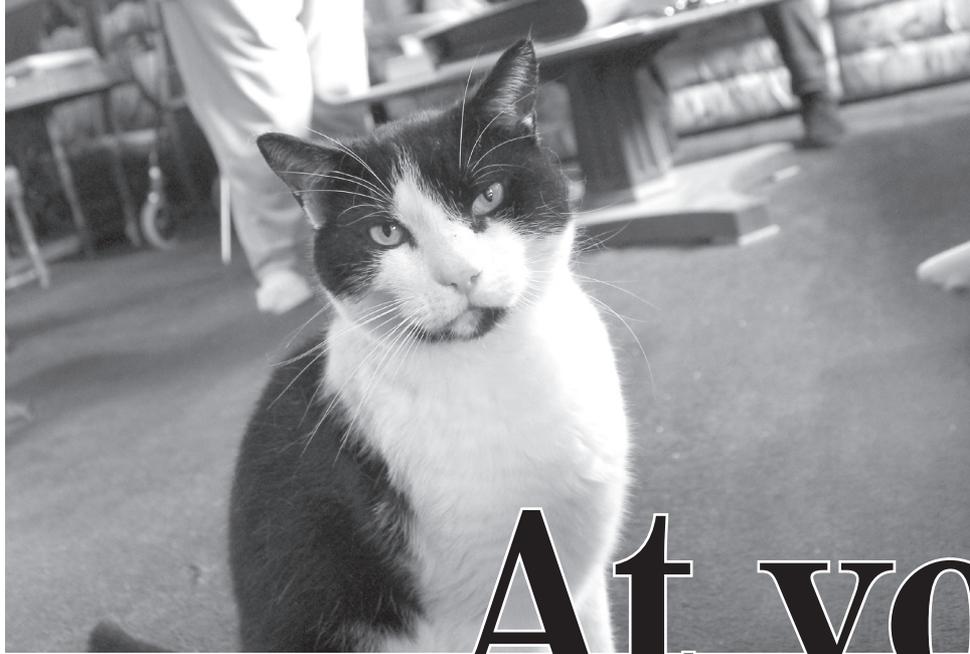
"I don't remember a thing," recalled Vertlieb. "I woke up in a stretcher and had an oxygen mask on. He's saved me many times. He's been wonderful."

Another time, when Vertlieb fell out of bed and couldn't move, Coco Vertlieb called her in his mouth so she could call for help. He licks her forehead when she has a fever. He laid by her side when she was bedridden for years with very limited movement.

"Everything from when I was in a wheelchair, to pre-hospice and he's by my side right now," said Vertlieb, who was told by doctors in 2008 that she had six months to live. "I don't know what I would do without him."

Luckily, she doesn't have to worry about that just yet. Coco is an older dog and very sick, but thanks to a local organization, he's getting the care he needs.

Sam's Hope was founded in February 2013 and has since awarded 123 veterinary care grants to those in need, such as the one that has helped Coco receive medical attention. The grants aid low-income pet owners who cannot afford the cost of medical care for their



pets.

"We're keeping animals in their homes. There is not a lot of funding out there for that," explained Sam's Hope founder Marianne Iaquinto. "Instead of sheltering these animals and hoping for the best, it's a way of keeping them in their homes."

Sam's Hope has many community outreach programs including collecting food donations for pets in need and delivering food and supplies to homebound elderly pet owners. The organization distributes approximately 4,000 pounds of food throughout the Philadelphia area each month. Most of that feeds cats and dogs, but can also include food for birds, hamsters and gerbils.

Eli and Gladys Blank receive food donations from Sam's Hope bimonthly. They found Panda, a tuxedo cat, abandoned outside with no food or water. He had been declawed, which led his new owners to believe he was once domesticated, but someone left him behind.

"When you get old, you don't think that you're going to get another pet," said Gladys, a Bustleton resident. "But when you see him outside with no claws to defend himself, how can you not help him? Besides, a house is not a home without an animal."

The services offered by Sam's Hope are beneficial to people as well. According to the SPCA, pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression. They have lower blood pressure and less anxiety. Having a pet can also increase exercise and provide companionship.

"Animals are good for people. Having that animal there is important and healthy," said Iaquinto. "The elderly and homebound don't get out much. Their pets are all they see sometimes."

The Homebound Elderly Program at Sam's Hope began in September 2014. Volunteers reached out to local business looking for donations and then organized food pantries and dropoffs for those in need. Two Walmart locations in the Northeast — at Philadelphia Mills and in the Whitman Square Shopping Center on Roosevelt Boulevard — regularly donate food and

Providing hope: At left, Panda was rescued by Eli and Gladys Blank, who receive pet food donations from Sam's Hope. Below, Patricia Vertlieb's service dog, Coco, has saved her life several times by barking for help and bringing her a cell phone to call 911. The elderly dog received a veterinary grant from Sam's Hope to receive medical attention.

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pet supplies. In Northeast Philadelphia, 98 pets receive home-delivered meals on a bimonthly basis.

"Some of these people might have hit that rough spot and can't afford to feed or take their pet to the vet and they end up having to surrender their animals," said Iaquinto. "That's a burden on the shelter system. Seven to eight million pets annually pass through shelters and only half of them make it out."

Currently, Sam's Hope has approximately 13 volunteers, but is always looking for more. Somerton's Ellen Rosenzweig has been volunteering with the organization about one year. Patricia Vertlieb and her daughter, Christine, are also volunteers.

"I think that the Lord blessed me to get better and function so that I can volunteer," said Patricia, now 53. "Coco is such a wonderful dog, but he's so sick. I think now, maybe it's my turn to take care of him and other animals that need help."

Since its inception, Sam's Hope has grown to distribute more than 120,000 pounds of pet food throughout Philadelphia, Bucks and Montgomery counties. Its biggest challenge is the need for more volunteers. Also, the organization is unable to afford an office space, so currently, volunteers work out of a storage unit in Bucks County. Iaquinto hopes to expand Sam's Hope citywide and also partner with an online retailer that can help deliver food and supplies to clients more often.

"I would love to grow the Homebound Elderly Program. The elderly with their pets — they have an amazing bond," said Iaquinto. "These pets are a part of your family. It's about keeping that together. We made a lot of life-or-death differences for these animals. Being able to save them, it's a beautiful thing." ●●



SOURCE: PATRICIA VERTLIEB