

## Day of the Dog

This month, strap on your walking shoes for an event that aims to keep your dog's tail wagging and heart pumping

The idea of performing open-heart surgery on a dog to save its life seems extreme at first – even a bit kooky, perhaps.

There's the cost, for one, not to mention the effect on the animal. But talk to psychotherapist Lois Arnold of Phoenix for a few minutes, and it no longer sounds so "out there." She's organizing an animal health fair this month to convince other pet owners, too.

"When you bring a life into your home, whether it has two legs or four legs, you make a commitment to care for that life to the best of your ability," she says.

Arnold honored that commitment to her cockapoo, Carmel, after finding out the eight-year-old dog was suffering late-stage heart failure and had three months to live.

Many dog owners at this point would say, hey, we had eight good years together. Not Arnold. "I am a fixer by nature," she says.

She went online and nine hours later discovered that Dr. Chris Orton of Colorado State University wrote a paper on the repair and replacement of mitral valves in dogs' hearts. Within months, she was in Fort Collins, where Orton performed the operation that saved Carmel's life. She is now 14.

"Open heart surgery and repairing heart valves is standard therapy in people," Orton says. "It's just a matter of time before therapies that are currently available for people are available for animals."

Thirty years ago, he says, many people thought it was crazy to treat cancer in animals. Now, it's common.

"Dogs were being put to sleep over hip arthritis," Orton said. "Now total hip replacement is routine."

Arnold says she has spent the equivalent of "a couple of cars" on Carmel and her follow-up care due to complications. Orton says open-heart surgery alone costs between \$10,000 and \$14,000.

Open-heart surgery is not always needed. A veterinarian told Kelly Tinberg of Phoenix that Babs, her 10-week-old Cavalier King Charles spaniel, was going to die any day of a heart murmur and there was nothing she could do. Shortly afterward, she met a woman in a parking lot who was admiring Babs, and as Tinberg told her of the heart murmur, the woman said, "You have to meet my friend Lois."

Through Arnold's connections, Tinberg took Babs to a cardiologist at Texas A&M University who performed, basically, an angioplasty. It cost her \$1,500 plus travel expenses.

"She just celebrated her second birthday is the vet said she's going strong and could live a long time,"

Tinberg says. "I feel such a bond and a kinship with Lois. She saved my little girl's life."

Arnold wants to make more people aware that heart disease can kill pets – it's the second-leading medical cause of death next to cancer – and that treatments are available.

"A lot of pet owners like me probably don't see it coming," she says.

That's why she's organizing the fourth annual Heart to Heart Pet-a-Rama walk-a-thon 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Feb. 17 at Steele Indian School Park in Phoenix. The event aims to educate people, save pets' lives and raise money for the veterinary heart center at Colorado State University, which is the regional veterinary school serving Arizona (students of the program pay Arizona tuition).

There's a good chance the work they're doing at that university will help determine the cause of mitral valve disease in humans as well.

Six veterinarians, the two Valley veterinarian cardiologists, Orton and the dean of the Colorado State vet school will be onsite screening dogs for heart murmurs. Hundreds of animals will be up for adoption by several Valley shelters and rescue groups (euthanasia is the leading overall cause of death in pets).

The event also will feature vendors, freebies, dog agility demonstrations, contests for dogs and humans, the Great Dane Drill Team and the Petite Elite Miniature Horse Drill Team. Last year, the walk-a-thon drew nearly 500 walkers and 6,000 participants, and raised \$83,000. Part of the money this year will go toward developing a hot line through Colorado State for referrals and general information.

“I’m thankful that I have the means to do what I’ve done for Carmel,” Arnold says. “It was clear she wasn’t giving up, so how could I give up? How dare I?”

For information on the Heart to Heart Pet-a-Rama, visit [www.hearttoheartpetarama.com](http://www.hearttoheartpetarama.com) or call (602) 570-2755.

--Geri Koeppel

