

True Stories Competition – Schools Category, under 800 words
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ANNIE'S STORY

I am the daughter of a Hospice Nurse. That means that I am frequently present when my mother offloads on us as a family what she has 'learnt about life today'. The meaning of life – and death – is a topic frequently discussed in our household. And then something touched my heart very deeply when I became involved in assisting my mum in an unusual incident.

A very dear lady with a terminal illness was progressively getting weaker and needed to start putting things in place for her final stage of life. Most importantly, she needed to move out of her house where she had lived on her own for many years. Her cat Ally, which she loved with all of her heart, was her most faithful companion. Being a nervous creature, she behaved as if she were feral, always hissing and spitting when the Hospice Sisters visited, dashing away from any attempts of affection. My mother could not believe her own ears as she assured this lady that she would re-home her cat to someone who would grow to love Ally as much as she did. She had no idea how to go about even catching the cat to start with! The assurance that Ally could stay with her for as long as possible was consolation enough to allow her to move on with the necessary plans for the end of her life.

The dreaded day came, sooner than she had anticipated, when this dear lady had to be moved to a place of care. She just wasn't strong enough to be alone in a big house anymore. With the assistance of her GP and the Hospice Sisters, she was transferred, reassured that my mother would go back for Ally and pack up her house. So it was that weekend when I came home from school, when my mother asked if I would help her to pack up the contents of the house, under specific instruction from a lady who was not well. She had even managed to write out what was to go where and who was to be given what. It was whilst we were sorting and cleaning that I learnt how this wonderful community of Howick had pulled together to assist someone during their last few months of life. The Estate Agent had pulled out all the stops to get the transfer of the house through in record time, liaising closely with Hospice and

the Municipality. The pharmacy kindly delivered all the necessary medicines and sundry at the drop of a hat, and supermarkets delivered basic supplies as and when needed. Her attorney visited so as to get her legal affairs in order, and the undertakers assured her that her wishes would be carried out at the end.

And then there was Ally to deal with. After much resistance, she was finally rounded up and taken to my father's veterinary clinic, where she would board until the appropriate time to find a suitable home for her. Lucky for Ally, it wasn't a very long wait. In fact, her story pulled on the heartstrings of the vet clinic staff, and so she was adopted as the practice cat. By now, Ally's dear mother's health was waning, and not much joy could be seen when I visited her with my mum – until we started to show her photographs of her beloved Ally, living in the lap of luxury with every cat accessory and gourmet food imaginable. This cat was the one comfort she had had during the final stage of her illness – her one true companion left on this earth. It was comforting for her to know that her dear Ally whom she was leaving behind would be treated in the best way she could possibly ever have wished for.

This cat now 'owns' the clinic, lounging over the counters, enjoying the love and attention from staff and clients, and has even been seen to be walking amongst the visiting animals as if to say, "Touch me if you dare!"

I feel incredibly privileged to have been a very small part of this lady's life at the very end. It fills me with pride when I think about the many people and businesses that pulled together out of compassion, more than anything else, for a person who was alone at a frightening time of life. Every time I visit the clinic with my father and see their adopted and renamed kitty, 'Annie', I am reminded of her story, and the gracious community in which we live.

May you Rest in Peace – and thank you for teaching me about my special life in Howick.