

BEHIND THE SCENES

Helping to give fond farewell to family pets

There are tears every week at Molendinar's Pet Angel crematorium, but also wonderful moments of gratitude that make the tough job worthwhile for all their staff

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EVERY weekend Tom Jorgensen drives out to his hobby farm west of the Gold Coast and scatters ashes.

The self-described "animal nutter" says the ashes are those of animals cremated at his Molendinar crematorium, Pet Angel.

It's for the animals that can't go home – or who don't have a place to go home to, such as roadkill or injured wildlife.

"It's two hours away, it's beautiful and they go to the highest point of the farm," Jorgensen says of their final resting spot.

"There's a ridge that runs out back and it's absolutely the highest point, so they lie there with a 270-degree view."

Softly spoken and calm, Jorgensen doesn't like to do things by halves.

After decades of success in the construction industry, it was the haunting image of a woman leaving a vet clinic with her pet's ashes in a plastic bag, distraught, that made him think there had to be a

better way of saying goodbye to pets.

Following a year of research, the 67-year-old opened up the Gold Coast's first pet crematorium in March 2015, determined to make it more personal and deserving for the creatures that loyally stayed by their owners' sides throughout the years.

It was difficult at first. Jorgensen recounts that for months, he and a small handful of staff would wait ... and wait for someone to call for their services.

Days could go by without any pets coming through – but finally that eventually changed as word got around.

Now the business, situated inconspicuously in the middle of the Molendinar industrial estate, oversees up to 30 pet cremations every day between its 13 staff.

The warehouse was custom built to house an office upstairs, with a reception area at the front and an open-plan back-of-house.

One side of reception holds the urns and scatterboxes the company uses, ranging from teak

to walnut to silver urns, all with their names engraved on a small plaque.

Jorgensen says they also sell caskets, of which the sides can be decorated with images of the pet, but they are more popular in the US than in Australia.

Further down the hallway cards, letters and photos adorn the wall, from owners thanking Pet Angels for helping them through their grief. There's photos of Queensland police dogs, some of which were cremated here. They receive a special urn decorated with the Australian flag.

There's even a Remembrance Room, which allows pet owners to say goodbye one final time.

At Pet Angel the morning begins around 7.30am with the business's two large single-chamber cremators, imported from Florida, fired up and ready by 8am. They don't give off any emissions, so you won't see any smoke here.

It's just as well. As a proud Scandinavian and his mother's son – "a clean nut" – Jorgensen



wants everything squeaky clean and organised.

He's just as strict with the information collected about each animal that comes into the business, implementing six checks staff must make before returning the pet's ashes to its owners.

"If you give us Lulu, you need to have Lulu back, not walking away thinking you have Lulu back," Jorgensen explains. "I can guarantee if you come to us, you're getting your ashes back. That's 100 per cent true. We are crazy checkers."

Each pet is designated a small basket, a steel tag with an individual number and a neat clipboard of information that follows the pet throughout the process.

Before pets are placed into the cremation chambers, their paw prints are taken and locks of fur re-



tained, should the owner so choose.

Jorgensen explains that animals are checked for identifying features and their individual steel tag before they are placed individually inside the 1000C chamber.

Depending on the size of the pet, it takes just minutes. Afterwards, their remains are processed before being deposited into a small bag, which is then placed inside their urns or scatterboxes.

Different staff perform checks throughout the day so that there are no mix-ups. In the corner of the main area, a quote is neatly written on to the board, one of two sayings Jorgensen says he likes to remember.

"Quality means doing it right when no one is looking," reads the first quote by Henry Ford.

"There's no right way to do a wrong thing," is the second one he swears by.

"That's how I live my

life," Jorgensen says. He says it can be difficult at times to work in the industry and there's not a week that goes by where the staff don't cry.

But it also comes with enormous rewards.

"In so many businesses ... you only ever get told what you did wrong, here we get thanks, we get cards, we get bottles of wine, flowers ... you feel really good about yourself at the end of the day," he says. "It's extremely satisfying. It has its terribly sad moments though."

"I can remember this family ... they got the kids home from school early, mum, dad, two boys, and they were all crying uncontrollably. It wasn't easy, because (back then) I did everything, I was on the vans, I did the cremating. We try so hard. We try so hard."

Pet Angels recently opened its Brisbane office and will open its Newcastle office in the coming months.

