

# Pet lover until the end

By Allison Shirreffs



Christine Hunsaker

*Christine Hunsaker loves pets. She especially loves teacup poodles, which explains why she has three of them: Chester, Ruby and Lucky Girl. But it was the death of her first teacup poodle, her beloved Casey, that changed Hunsaker's life.*

**H**unsaker's father had been in the funeral business and his daughter also chose it as a career.

For 20 years, Hunsaker worked for two of the largest companies in the funeral business, eventually rising to president of Service Corporation International (SCI). With 20,000 employees, SCI is the largest provider of funeral, cremation and cemetery services in North America.

When Casey died, Hunsaker wanted her cremated so that she could have Casey with her at home. She searched for a pet crematorium in the Atlanta area and what she found didn't sit well with her. She wanted to be present during Casey's cremation, but was told that wasn't possible. Although several of the facilities she visited vowed the remains would be Casey's and Casey's alone, Hunsaker was disturbed by the fact that some pet crematories used human cremation machines. "It begs the question — are you going to run that machine for just one poodle? One cat? That question scares me to death," she says.

In honor of Casey and to provide peace of mind to pet owners like herself, Hunsaker decided to build a state-of-the-art pet crematorium where pet owners could be assured that their pets were cremated one at a time. "I wanted to build confidence in what goes on here because it's never easy to deal with the death of a pet," says Hunsaker, owner of Paws, Whiskers & Wags. "People want to know what's happening."

Hunsaker, a self-described planner, visited numerous pet crematoriums across the country and determined she could do better. Armed with an MBA and her funeral business experience, Hunsaker hammered out a business plan. In that plan, she went to great lengths to make sure the entire cremation process was open to pet owners. At her facility, cremations would happen on site, and pet owners could be present for the cremation. She'd also make her facility

a comfortable place for pet owners to say goodbye to their pets. She bought top-of-the-line equipment, including two \$80,000 pet cremation machines, as well as three trucks outfitted for pet pickup.

She also developed the Pet Tracker 360 System, which includes a tracking device to be worn by the pet during its lifetime and into death. The device can withstand the cremation process and ensures the ashes a pet owner receives are those of his or her pet.

It cost Hunsaker \$1.2 million to launch Paws, Whiskers & Wags. Located in Decatur not far from the DeKalb Farmer's Market, it's an unassuming red brick building with a blue awning. Inside, there's a reception desk and a giant portrait of Casey, Hunsaker's inspiration for the business. Two offices (there are five employees who work for the company) flank the reception area. Beyond the reception desk, a door opens to reveal a good-sized space with a living room-like feel.

On the other side of this room is the cremation area. There is a safety door with a small window through which pet owners can watch the process. Owners can also be in the cremation area if they choose to be.

Early on, Hunsaker invited veterinarians in the metro Atlanta area to visit her facility. She wanted them to see Paws, Whiskers & Wags, so that as trusted advisors, they could give pet owners their word that their pets would be treated with respect at her facility and that the ashes they received would be the ashes of their pet and their pet alone. Paws, Whiskers & Wags has partnered with more than 40 veterinary clinics in the Atlanta area (sixty percent of her business comes from vet referrals).

"From day one, she's been in it for the right reasons," says Dr. Andy Smith, DVM, owner of Powers Ferry Animal Hospital and a practicing veterinarian in Atlanta for 23 years. "As a pet owner, she knew what she wanted and she didn't find it, so she asked, 'How can I change that?'"

Smith spent an entire day at Hunsaker's facility watching the entire cremation process. "When a client looks me in the eye and asks, 'Are you sure I'll get my pet's ashes back? That my pet will be handled with dignity?' It's hard for me to say, 'Absolutely' if I haven't been there," explains Smith. "As a veterinarian, if I refer a client anywhere, it reflects on my hospital. You've got to have a tremendous level of confidence to refer someone."

When Smith lost Tucker, his 14-year-old yellow lab earlier this year, he chose Paws, Whiskers & Wags to handle the cremation. "My kids are 18 and 15. Tucker represented their whole childhood," recalls Smith, who reacted to the loss of his pet in the same way his clients do. "You don't get a second chance to say goodbye."

Open about a year and a half, business at Paws, Whiskers & Wags has already surpassed where Hunsaker thought she'd be after three years. (The charge for cremation at Hunsaker's facility ranges from \$149 to \$245). To date, Paws, Whiskers & Wags has helped 2,500 families deal with the loss of their pets.

The rapid growth of her company poses a managerial challenge, but Hunsaker remains dedicated to her motto of taking "really good care of pets and their owners one at a time." She has room for 10 more cremation machines at her facility and said she has "some of the best minds in the business" working on how to scale her business and not lose the personal touch. "If there's this dramatic of a need for this [service] in Atlanta," says Hunsaker, letting the phrase trail off before adding, "We will be a company to watch."

That said, Hunsaker repeats that Paws, Whiskers & Wags won't grow until the time is right. "I got into this because my heart was broken," she said. "I stay in it because somebody else's heart is breaking and they need us."