



8 Years...15,000-Plus Reunited Pets:

# The Evolution of Lost Pet Services, Inc.

By Candace T. Botha

**A**fter five long years, a Chicago family had given up every last shred of hope that Jericho Blue, their beloved cat that had gone missing, would ever be found.

But last year, when a stray cat was found on the streets of Sarasota and scanned for a microchip at a local clinic, the vet tech checked the number and found out the chip was unregistered.

Thanks to the dedication and diligence of Patty Dillon Giarrusso, founder and president of Lost Pet Services, Inc., a local 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that reunites lost and found pets with their families, the cat owner's son was tracked down in the Midwest and notified that the family's long-lost cat finally had been found.

Needless to say, Patty's phone call was met with much

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skepticism; in fact, the cat owner's son thought the call was a scam. However, when Patty insisted that it was their cat, the owner's niece flew to Sarasota and returned home to reunite the cat and his grateful and overjoyed owner.

While no one will ever know how a cat that went missing in Chicago ended up in Sarasota, one thing is certain: Heartbreak became over-the-moon happiness because of the efforts of one local woman who has made it her life's work to do whatever is necessary to bring lost and found pets back home where they belong.

It was Patty's own terrifying experience eight years ago, when her family's two dogs escaped from her backyard after a family member accidentally left the gate open, that became life-changing.

For the Giarrussos, their ordeal had a happy ending. Both dogs—Jackson, who was 10 years old, and Rocko, who was 4 at the time—were found safe several hours later.

However, the experience shook Patty to the core and soon became the impetus for creating a community resource that would help reunite pets lost or found in Sarasota and Manatee counties with their families.

That resource is an online Facebook group, [www.facebook.com/groups/941Lost-Pets](http://www.facebook.com/groups/941Lost-Pets) that has grown to 34.5 thousand members since it first was established in 2013.

It was four years later—in February 2017—that Patty took the initiative to launch Lost Pet Services, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that has since served as the fund-raising and resource arm of Lost and Found Pets 941.

Since the Facebook group was first launched 8 years ago, its mission has been to reunite lost pets with their owners, ensuring that “every lost pet makes it home safe.”

“Our mission helps keep hundreds of strays and lost pets out of overcrowded shelters,” Patty says. “Our goal is to ensure that every lost pet makes it home safe and, ideally, is reunited with his or her family on the same day.”

By all accounts, Lost Pet Services, fulfills that mission, each and every day.

As the region’s go-to resource for reporting lost and found pets, Lost Pet Services has developed a fine-tuned, automated system to spread the word about lost or found pets to other community pet owners, area shelters and online neighborhood groups. Here’s how the system works:

Community pet owners who have lost or found a pet fill out and submit an easy-to-use form online on Lost Pet Services’ website, [www.LostFoundPets941.com](http://www.LostFoundPets941.com), or the Facebook group page, [www.facebook.com/groups/941LostPets](http://www.facebook.com/groups/941LostPets). Within 10 to 30 minutes, a flyer that includes the information on the form, along with a photo of the lost or found pet, is developed and posted on the Facebook group page.

A second flyer, created in bright red and yellow, attention-getting colors, also is developed to post in neighborhoods where the pet was lost or found.

The key to getting information out to the community quickly is for each pet owner who has lost a pet to provide as much information as possible.

“When a pet is lost, owners must provide the city or town, the zip code, the nearest cross streets, a good photo, the date last seen or found and a contact name and number,” Patty says. “We also ask for a brief description of the pet that includes whether he or she is wearing a collar and tags and if he or she is microchipped,

“You cannot just write, ‘My dog was lost in Sarasota,’” Patty adds; “we need exact information in order to pinpoint where to begin searching.”

Once the flyer is posted in the Facebook group, that’s when the “magic” begins through the power of sharing.

“We update and maintain a comprehensive spreadsheet of all member volunteers that is broken down into specific zip codes and neighborhood zones,” Patty explains. “When the flyer is posted on Facebook, we tag the member volunteers in the zip code and neighborhood where the pet was lost or found in the post’s comments. Individuals that have been tagged will then share the post with their Facebook friends, neighbors and homeowner associations. What’s more, many of our volunteers and members also willingly search for lost animals in their neighborhoods.”

Among the Facebook group’s 34.5 thousand members, word about lost and found pets travels at lightning speeds!

“Last December, I posted a flyer of a missing Chihuahua that was shared by 193 members and reached 11,000 people in just one day,” Patty says. “Even hundreds of shares helps get those lost pets back home.”

In addition to sharing the flyer on Facebook, NextDoor.com and Twitter, it also is automatically sent to area shelters (depending on the county), including Humane Society of Manatee County, Bishop Animal Shelter, Humane Society at Lakewood Ranch and animal services in Sarasota and/or Manatee counties.

“Because of the large number of cats that go missing, we had to stop creating the social media flyers that are posted on our Facebook group page and other platforms,” Patty says. “However, we still develop the red-and-yellow flyers that we give to owners to post in their neighborhoods to help locate their missing cats.”

In her work with Lost Pet Services, Patty has developed strong affiliations with area



*Photo, opposite page: Patty Dillon Giarrusso, founder and president of Lost Pet Services, Inc., at home with her four pups. Photo by Chris Lake*

*Top photo: Jericho Blu, the Chicago-born cat found in Sarasota by Lost Pet Services, is reunited after five years with Zak, the cat’s owner, by Ellen, his cousin, who flew to Florida to bring the kitty home.*

*Photo, above: Patty receives a recognition award from the Manatee County Sheriff’s Office. Photos courtesy of Patty Dillon Giarrusso*

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shelters, veterinarians and animal services. In Manatee County, for example, callers who try to reach animal services after hours to report a lost or found pet are given Lost Pet Services' phone number for immediate assistance.

Needless to say, Patty and her volunteers' work on behalf of lost and found pets has earned noteworthy honors through the years.

In addition to receiving a recognition award from the Manatee County Sheriff's Department for donating a microchip scanner, Lost Pet Services also has won several awards as part of the Giving Challenge. In 2018, the organization was distinguished as the "Best Nonprofit Partnership" and for the "Best Giving Challenge Story," and in 2020, honors for "Best Photo" and "Most Unique Donors" were awarded.

Since the Facebook group was established, Patty estimates that Lost Pet Service Inc.'s efforts have reunited more than 15,000 pets with their families. And in 2020 alone, more than 2,925 pets and their families were reunited.

"We literally reunite hundreds of animals every month," Patty says with well-deserved pride.

Serving pet owners primarily in Sarasota and Manatee counties, Lost Pet Services' reach also extends to the border of Charlotte County.

Patty—who admits that her work with Lost Pet Services keeps her seated in front of her computer from early morning to late at night—is extremely grateful for the assistance of her "amazing volunteers" that include 14 local women.

Leona Bice serves as organization's adoption coordinator, and Sue Srock helps with foster coordination, microchip scanning and vet transportation. The remaining volunteers—including Jonna Koellhoffer, Lee Gillespie Goss and Paula Rowell-Foster, along with Dana, Ad, Jeanine, Lynda, Sherry, Ann, Kelly, Pam and Beth—are all instrumental in the organization's ongoing success.

Especially noteworthy is Patty's "#1 volunteer," Terry Creamer, who celebrated her fourth anniversary working with Patty on January 2.

Terry also serves as vice president on the board of directors of Lost Pet Services, along with Jenifer Funk, Jim Giarrusso, Patty's husband, and Patty, who is president.

Of Terry's involvement with the organization, Patty says, "She's so dedicated; every day she's on the computer and won't take a break. I'd be absolutely lost without her."

In addition to working 365 days a year to fulfill its mission, Lost Pet Services has evolved to offer a full spectrum of additional services, including:

- Providing FREE microchips with FREE lifetime registration at the Humane Society of Manatee County in Bradenton and Animal Rescue Coalition in Sarasota through Lost Pet Services' voucher coupon program.
- Offering FREE pet ID tags at special events and through an online form available on the organization's website ([www.lostfoundpets941.com](http://www.lostfoundpets941.com)). The ID tags ordered online are mailed via first-class mail to pet owners.
- Paying reclaim fees for owners that cannot afford to pay the high-cost expenses at local shelters.
- Covering the costs of spaying, neutering and vaccinations on a case-by-case basis if families cannot afford these basic veterinary services.
- Providing basic pet necessities, such as food, kitty litter, dog crates, collars and leashes, if eligible families cannot afford them.
- Developing and paying for lost pet flyers if a pet owner does not have a printer or the financial means to cover their cost.
- Paying for spay/neuter services, vaccinations and microchips for stray pets. If their owners cannot be found, Lost Pet Services ensures that these animals are adopted into loving homes.

But that's not all. Most impressive in Lost Pet Service Inc.'s metamorphosis is the medical care it provides for injured or sick strays whose owners were never found, as well as for pets that become ill or are injured when they were missing from home.

Last year, between January 1 and December 31, Lost Pet Services financed treatment and/or surgery for 129 medical claims, helping 87 pets.

"Most of the pets that receive medical care from Lost Pet Services have been hit by cars while they were running and scared to death," Patty says. "Many of these dogs



**Top photo: Coco was reunited with his human brother nearly a week after the family had been told their cat had died. The cat was in critical condition when found at animal services, and was rushed to a veterinary clinic in Palmetto, where medical care funded by Lost Pet Services saved the cat's life.**

**Photo, above: The image of this adorable little girl holding Cooper, a senior Chihuahua that was adopted through Lost Pet Services when his owner was not found, won 1st place for "Best Picture" in the 2020 Giving Challenge. Photos courtesy of Leona Bice**

and cats required surgery that their owners simply just could not afford.

“Without our financial assistance, these families would have been faced with the heartbreaking decision of euthanizing their beloved pets or surrendering them to a county shelter so they could receive the treatment they needed to survive,” she adds.

What does Lost Pet Services charge for these lifesaving services?

**Absolutely nothing.**

“There are still pet owners in our community who think that we charge a fee for our services, but everything we do is completely free of charge,” Patty comments.

How, then can Lost Pet Services afford to help reunite so many lost and found pets with their owners?

Participation in community and nationwide fund-raising efforts, including the Giving Challenge and Giving Tuesday, has been instrumental in providing the funds needed to run the organization, as well as help the animals that face medical challenges.

Grants also are another important source of funding for Lost Pet Services. In fact, last year, the organization received the 2020 Animal Welfare Grant from the Community Foundation of Sarasota that was provided by the Robert Parker Fund in the amount of \$10,000 for medical care, microchips and microchip scanners.

All other funds needed to support the organization’s work are raised through donations and online requests for assistance for specific medical needs.

In achieving its #1 goal, which is to keep pets and their families together, Lost Pet Services created a medical/pet assistance program called “Marmalade’s Fund,” which helps the organization fund veterinary care for injured animals, including dogs, cats, turtles, lizards and other pets, when their owners cannot be found or in cases when the owners cannot afford to pay for their pets’ medical expenses.

Donations to Marmalade’s Fund can be made online by visiting [www.lostfound-pets941.com](http://www.lostfound-pets941.com) and clicking on the “Donate” tab on the home page.

There are times when emergent cases arise that funds are short, but the financial need is great. That’s when Patty will post the details about the case on the organization’s Facebook group page—[www.facebook.com/groups/941LostPets](http://www.facebook.com/groups/941LostPets)—and ask for donations.

“We are so fortunate that Lost Pet Services has such wonderful members that are willing to not only share our lost pet flyers online, but also donate to help ill or injured animals,” Patty says. “People are so generous and supportive of us. When we really need funds, thankfully, I can make a request online, and the funds starting coming in.”

Case in point: Last year, a Yorkie named Parker was found in a hole 10 days after he went missing.

“Parker was in terrible shape,” Patty remembers. “He had deep wounds and was covered with maggots; we think he might have been picked up and dropped by a predator bird.”

The pup’s medical bills were more than \$6,000, but in just 48 hours, Patty raised \$4,000, thanks to the generosity of the organization’s members and supporters.

While pets of all ages go missing, Patty says that the number of senior dogs that are reported lost is a special concern.

“We have so many older dogs that are lost right now,” she comments. “Most of these dogs are missing, because they are suffering from doggy dementia. Their owners let them outside, convinced that they will not wander or leave the yard, and suddenly they cannot be found anywhere.

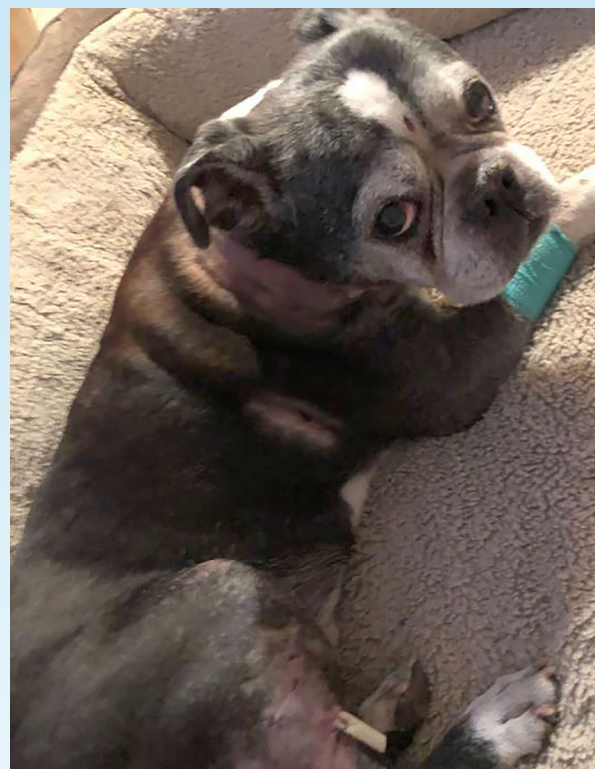
“Tragically, these dogs often are killed by alligators or they drown in neighborhood ponds or canals; it happens too often,” Patty adds.

Pets also often go missing when family members or lawn and pool service personnel or handymen forget to secure a gate in the yard or while in the care of an inexperienced pet sitter.

There are, Patty says, two simple things pet owners can do to keep their four-legged companions safe:

- Be sure that your dog or cat is wearing a collar with an ID tag that includes your current phone number every time he or she goes outdoors.
- Microchip your pets, and make sure the chip is registered and up to date with your current home address and phone number.

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*Top photo: Patty and one of her volunteers scan a lost dog for a microchip. Photo by Chris Lake*

*Photo, above: Rocky, a lost Boston Terrier/Boxer mix, required major surgery after he was found in the bushes with serious neck and leg injuries. Lost Pet Services funded his medical care and, when his owner couldn't be located, he found a loving home with one of the nonprofit organization's foster families. Photo courtesy of Patty Dillon Giarrusso*

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“One day last year, I had five lost animals with unregistered chips,” Patty recalls. “It takes hours to track these pets down.”

But that doesn’t deter Patty from trying to find lost pets with “dead end” (unregistered) microchips. To that end, she is a member of Microchip Help of Lost Dogs of America, an organization that provides tools to help reunite pets and their owners.

“We do whatever it takes to find each pet’s owner,” Patty says.

Patty and her husband, Jim, who live in Bradenton, now have four dogs of their own, and each one is a rescue.

About 2 years of age, Carly is a Havenese or Shih Tzu mix that was found in Palmetto and brought to Bishop Animal Shelter in Bradenton. Patty took her in to find her original home, but her owner was never located.

Haley, a Schnauzer mix that is about 6 or 7 years old, had been hit by a car when she was found on the side of the road.

“The girl that found Haley couldn’t keep her, so Jim and I took her in,” Patty says.

“Her tail was broken right at her spine, but, thankfully, it healed, although it still moves a little funny when she wags it.”

The newest additions to the Giarrusso household are Sophie and Rambo, two Chihuahuas that are close to 3 years of age and from the same litter. The bonded pups were placed together with one of Lost Pet Services’ foster families, and Patty and Jim agreed to watch the two pups one weekend. By Sunday night, Patty was in love.

“Jim said no, but I insisted,” she says with a laugh. “I was afraid that if someone else adopted them, they would be separated.”

Did Patty ever believe, in Lost Pet Services’ early days, that her Facebook group and nonprofit organization would have the regional impact it has today?

“Oh, my gosh, no!” she replies. “We were literally the very first lost pet group in our area; I thought that we might eventually have a couple hundred people in the group.”

Truth be told, since the Facebook group was first launched, it continues to grow by leaps and bounds each month.

“There are some months when we add as many as 400 or 500 new members,” Patty says, “but we average about 200 new members a month.”

In addition to her work with Lost Pet Services, Patty also is the host of a weekly, Internet-based podcast called “Let’s Talk Pets” that is produced and broadcast online by Society Bytes Radio, which is part of the Radio Ear Network family. The weekly podcast also airs on iHeart Radio, Spotify, Spreaker and Apple podcasts.

With 148-plus episodes “under her belt,” Patty now records four, 30-minute shows once a month from her home in Bradenton. In addition to discussing lost pets and the best protocols for finding their owners, she also shares a range of pet-related topics, “feel-good stories” and valuable regional and national resources for pet owners. Patty’s podcasts often include interviews with pet professionals throughout the country, and each show ends with a reminder to microchip pets, to ensure microchips are registered and up to date and to be certain pets are wearing ID tags with the owners’ current contact information at all times.

While Patty is rightfully proud of how the Facebook group she launched eight years ago has flourished, she does admit it can be extremely trying at times.

“Some days are so frustrating or heartbreaking that we just sit and cry; it is so sad when lost pets have been hit by cars or, even worse, when they are found dead,” Patty says. “In fact, several people had to stop working with us because of the sadness we experience day in and day out.”

“Personally, I deal with it every day, no matter how devastating it may be,” Patty continues. “It is the stories with happy endings that keep me going.”

“We have received so many thank you’s from pet owners through the years,” Patty adds. “But we don’t do this work for the thank you’s. We do it because it’s so rewarding to know that what we accomplish by reuniting lost or found pets with their owners really does matter.” 🐾



**Top photo: Patty Dillon Giarrusso and Terry Creamer, president and vice president of Lost Pet Services, attend a community event to promote the life-saving work of Lost Pet Services, Inc.**

**Photo, above: Teresa Rapkin is pictured with Pani, a lost dog that had been hit by a car and suffered a broken pelvis and femur. Lost Pet Services helped Pani's family by donating \$1,800 to help cover the dog's surgical bill. Funding for part of Pani's care was provided by a grant from the Robert Parker Fund of the Community Foundation of Sarasota. Photos courtesy of Patty Giarrusso**

For more information about the lifesaving work of Lost Pet Services, Inc., visit [www.lostfoundpets941.com](http://www.lostfoundpets941.com) or, on Facebook, visit [www.Facebook.com/groups/94-1LostPets](http://www.Facebook.com/groups/94-1LostPets).