

A Farewell To Lucy

The decision to euthanize Lucy, my best friend of 15 years, was quite possibly the hardest decision I've had to make in my life

By Amy Cavalier

On Friday, Feb. 25, I put my dog Lucy to sleep. We've been through a lot together. I adopted her when I was 18 years old and she practically raised me as much as I raised her. Together we played, we grew up, we learned, we celebrated, we loved and we mourned.

Coming to the decision to euthanize Lucy, my best friend of 15 years, was quite possibly the hardest decision I've had to make in my life up until this point.

Everyone told me, "you'll know when its time" or "the dog will tell you when its time." Let me tell you, it wasn't that easy.

Lucy didn't make it easy. The old girl put up quite a fight. She had plenty of spirit left in her, but her legs just couldn't keep up.

According to her vet, David Hancock of Perinton Vet Clinic, Lucy suffered from a compression of the spinal cord, which is producing a failure of nerve communication from her brain to her back legs. "She no longer knows where her back legs are, and has difficulty putting them in the right spot, but that particular problem isn't painful, it doesn't hurt," Hancock told me a few months before I came to the decision. "If she couldn't walk or move, now we'd have a major issue, but just because she stumbles doesn't mean she is pain."

As a result of this condition, Lucy walked around like she was drunk, sort of staggering and, sometimes, her back legs would get tangled causing her to fall. She had difficulty getting up, but she was still going up and down small flights of stairs and getting under foot whenever I was cooking in the kitchen. She would practically tear my hand off when I would offer her a treat. She could still stand to eat and drink on her own for the most part, and she wasn't having accidents in the house that often.

For a while, I wasn't convinced it was time, or that she was ready. I asked my vet for guidance on coming to the end of life decision. Hancock told me he measures a dog's quality of life using three characteristics — attitude, appetite and activity. If a dog is unable to move, doesn't have a good appetite, those are pretty good indicators they could be ready to be euthanized. Activity is another indicator. "Do they still seek attention, are they engaged in life, do they interact, or are they just apathetic," said Hancock. "Those three things, individually and in combination, determine when its appropriate to allow a dog to go."

For a while, I wondered if I really would "just know," as everyone led me to believe I would. My vet said it's not uncommon for a patient to ask "is it time?" People want guidance. In the



Amy Cavalier with her dog Lucy. "I know Lucy will always be with me, but she was ready to go and I think I was finally ready to let her go."

end though, Hancock told me, "I don't make the decision for you, Amy, or for anyone else. That decision has to come from you and you have to be convinced it's the right decision because it's irreversible and I don't want anyone second guessing that decision. These are things that have been our very good friends for a very long time and we all want to be making that decision appropriately."

Dr. Hancock said euthanizing pets is the hardest part of his job. "I've spent a lot of time crying with my clients," he said. "It never gets easier."

I adopted Lucy in August 1995. Back then, her name was Sheba. Upon adopting her, I changed Sheba's name to Lucy. I was 18 years old and fresh out of high school, about to enter my freshman year of college. Lucy was a 6-month-old mutt; 30 pounds of adorable, red spunk very much resembling a fox. It was not easy being a young college student raising a puppy, and many things were destroyed in the process. Despite all the trouble she caused, the two of us became inseparable. She was completely attached to me and could be trusted off a leash because she was so loyal she would never leave my side.

Lucy loved to chase squirrels up trees, and I mean she literally could get five feet up the tree and still stick the landing! She enjoyed being spoiled by "grandma," loved blankets and soft fuzzy soccer balls, and was an all around easy-going, well socialized dog. She made many dog and cat friends in her day.

Together we moved from place to place, and Lucy was there with me as I completed my degree and began my career. She was there through all my ups and downs, and sometimes she was the cause of them. It was late March of 2001 when Lucy was about 6 years old. For a few days, she'd been acting funny. Finally, I noticed that she was sluggish, to the point where she wouldn't eat or drink anything. I rushed her to the vet's office where I received some very grim news. Lucy had Auto Immune Hemolytic Anemia

or, in other words, her immune system was attacking her red blood cells. Where most dogs have 37 to 57 percent red blood cells in their blood stream, Lucy's were at 10 percent. Her platelet count was around 71,000. Normal levels are 200,000 to 500,000. "That's on death's doorstep," said her former veterinarian Eric Ehrhardt, owner of Fruit Valley Veterinary Clinic in Oswego. In serious cases, the immune system will even also attack the bone marrow. For a week, Lucy stayed at the veterinarian's office and showed no signs of improving. She had very little energy and could barely walk. "They don't have the energy to spare for eating and walking," Dr. Ehrhardt said of dogs with AIHA. "It's totally exhausting. They're basically in shock."

Lucy received a blood transfusion and stayed at the veterinarian's office for five days, every one of which I would light a candle at night and pray that my dog would live to see old age. I wasn't ready to lose this dog so young. I would visit Lucy several times a day, sneaking in some contraband turkey to tempt her taste buds. But still, her red blood cell count showed no signs of recovery.

When Lucy was finally sent home on a Friday, the vets told me there was a good chance she would just pass away in her sleep, but they left the catheter in her paw just in case she seemed uncomfortable and needed to be put to sleep. Although she had no appetite, I was directed to try to give her five different medications twice a day. Three days later, on Monday, Lucy was still alive. I called the vet's office and they told me to bring her in. A blood test showed her red blood cell count had risen to 17 percent. It seemed almost like a miracle. After at least \$1,000 in vet bills, a lot of medications and months of rebuilding her strength, Lucy returned to her old self and every day since then has seemed like a gift.

In her lifetime, Lucy has had several dental surgeries, she chewed at least a dozen pairs of shoes, she's lived in

two states and survived two dog attacks. Lucy spent a few weeks with one of my friends in Long Island one summer, and when I went to retrieve her, we took a detour to New York City where she got to see a concert in Central Park and ride the subway.

This dog has lived more lives than any cats and better than many people. She's lived the best life she could live. It was hard to make the decision this time around to pull the plug, but it's a decision that's been 15 years in the making. I knew the day would come. I even started a blog over a year ago, written from the perspective of Lucy, a dying dog reflecting on her life.

In the end, the blog fizzled out. Just the day-to-day responsibilities of taking care of a geriatric dog took up any time I might have to blog. And after a while, it was just sad, because Lucy's quality of life was just not there anymore. So I made the appointment to have her euthanized Friday, Feb. 25. I wasn't sure what this would be like, how I would handle losing my best friend.

Of course, bringing Lucy to the vet for the last time was overwhelmingly sad. Taking her collar off her for the last time and feeling the warmth leave it was devastating. But at the same time, I feel like this is a celebration. The fact that I kept a dog alive and well for this many years is something I am proud of. I gave her the best life a dog could ask for. It will be hard without her. I'll miss being able to bury my face in her fur when times are tough. I'll miss her kisses, which never failed to make me smile through the hard times. Things are so quiet now that she's gone, but it's also nice to have some freedom. I know Lucy will always be with me, but she was ready to go and I think I was finally ready to let her go. Even though you'll never be ready.

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