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July 26, 2000

Dr. Elliot Katz
In Defense of Animals
131 Camino Alto, Suite E
Mill Valley, CA 94941

"Owners" and "Guardians"

Dear Dr. Katz:

I would like to offer my perspective on In Defense of Animals' campaign to change the way people consider companion animals, by changing the term "owner" to "*guardian*." To some, this seems frivolous and even ridiculous; however, I believe the change of terminology is an excellent way to create a powerful paradigm shift in the way our entire society regards, and consequently treats, its animals.

I was a practicing veterinarian in Denver, Colorado, for five years. During that time, it became very clear to me that there is a subtle but profound difference between people who looked at companion animals as property ("*owners*"), versus people who felt that their animal companions were part of the family ("*guardians*").

"Owners" tended to be far more mechanistic and less involved in their companion animals' care. There were generally unwilling to do much in the way of testing or treatment, since practical and/or financial considerations usually outweighed the needs of the animal. Let me give you an example. Bob brought in a beautiful long-haired white cat, Snowy, a 12-year old neutered male, for an annual examination. During our conversation, he mentioned that this cat had been confined to the basement for several years "because it urinated on the carpet." Now, Bob and his wife were getting ready to renovate the basement, and there would no longer be a place for Snowy. He planned to take the cat to a shelter. I explained to Bob that a cat who urinates on the floor is not adoptable and would be euthanized (killed) at a shelter. I also told him that it would be cruel to abandon this sweet cat who, had never known any other home (such as it was), to the strange noises, foreign smells, and outright terror of a shelter for the last days of his life. I ended up euthanizing that poor cat that very day. The "owner" was very pleased with the decision, as it relieved him of an awkward responsibility. Bob was an *owner*, and Snowy, who had shared his life for 12 years, meant no more to him than a frayed blanket or a broken chair. Personally, I grieved for the years of emotional neglect that Snowy had already endured, and for the undeserved, premature ending of his precious, innocent life.

Contrast this with another client, Kathy, who has two older cats. The male, Chaucer, was diagnosed with hyperthyroidism. Karen canceled a long-planned trip to see her elderly father back east, to stay home and make sure that Chaucer was stabilized on his medication. She lost the price of the non-refundable plane tickets, and ultimately, her father had to come out to Colorado to see her! Kathy travels quite a bit, and this was not the first time she had completely changed her plans to accommodate the physical and emotional needs of her beloved cats. And I suspect it won't be the last. Kathy is the *guardian* of her cats, and their welfare and well-being are of supreme importance to her.

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I could go on and on with examples of wonderful, caring *guardians* whose animals are members of their families, because there are so many of them. Fortunately, I worked in a specialty clinic and the majority of our clients were *guardians*. Dealing with *owners*, though, was very depressing. It was my job to help these animals, but the biggest hurdle was usually not the difficulty of medically handling the case, but rather, in getting the *owner* to commit to so much as giving a pill. With *guardians*, all I needed to do was fully explain what was needed, and they were on board immediately. What a joy they were to deal with!

This is why I think that IDA's campaign is truly worthwhile. Just the dialogue and debate it has already inspired is a giant step on the way to a more enlightened and civilized society. When we learn to treat our animals better, we will treat our children, and each other, better too. For as the great leader Mohandas Gandhi said, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jean Hofve', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jean Hofve, DVM