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Enough Dogs and Cats...What My Axolotl Thinks About Coronavirus

Spoiler...not much!

Just two weeks before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, I tagged along with a few friends who were shopping for fish at Wilmette Pet. At the entrance, I spotted what looked like a tiny albino T-rex floating in a large tank. Our eyes met—mine big and brown and hers small, charcoal briquets protruding from her head. Maybe it was the transparent skin displaying whatever she eats for lunch, or her winged ears flapping mercilessly against the glass tank. Two animals who love to eat meat and sleep all day. I loved her, and she loved me instantly.

I left that pet store as the proud owner of \$50 Booty, a pink baby axolotl. Amphibians like her make up just a fraction of the pets in the United States. Americans seem to prefer furry, and feathery, friends. Bald animals need a new PR agency. According to The American Veterinary Medical Association, U.S citizens own 89.7 million dogs, 95.6 million cats, 20.6 million birds and 5 million rabbits. And during the pandemic, a record number of them became pet parents. After all, staying in-place can be lonely and dull. No wonder some shelters are even running out of animals to adopt. In New York and Los Angeles, The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals cited a 70 percent jump in animal fostering compared to the same time last year.

While many pets found human parents during the coronavirus quarantine, others (like Booty) found them before the nationwide lockdown. I could drive Booty's tank home from college, but other students without the means to transport their new friends were stuck in difficult situations. When Jamie Stummer, 19, went home to Ohio for spring break, she thought Northwestern students would be returning to campus just two weeks later. Hah. She left her new two-inch, two dollar rainbow beta fish, Braeden, in Evanston with her friend, Claire Wiechart. Northwestern's announcement that classes would be finished remotely along with the start of a nationwide quarantine meant that Braeden would find a more permanent home in Evanston. "This is the longest babysitting job I've ever had," says Claire, who has now been watching Braeden for over

four months. “I’m so nervous I’m gonna kill it. I’d feel so bad.” Still, she says she hopes Jamie and Braeden can reunite this fall, when Northwestern students are allowed to live on campus again.

While Braeden the beta fish may not realize the pandemic’s effect on his mother’s custody status, other pets across the country have demonstrated that they know something is up. Sammi Blankstein, 21, shares that ever since quarantine began, “My dog started peeing in the exact same spot on the dining room carpet every day. Even if we take it out first thing in the morning. It just comes right back in and pees on the carpet.” Northwestern senior Tessa Kauppila’s dog, Phoebe, has gained so much weight in the past few months that the vet requested that she be put on diet food immediately. I feel you, Phoebe.

If only we could explain to our pets why their worlds are suddenly so different. Booty the axolotl will never understand the sudden switch from frozen pet store bloodworms to Trader Joe’s frozen shrimp from my freezer. She cherishes any mush served from my elbow-length orange kitchen glove twice a week. Phoebe the basset hound will never know that a virus is behind the new abundance of fattening snacks. Braeden the beta fish will never realize that his true mother sits 358 miles away in Columbus, Ohio. They may sense a disturbance, but they’ll never grasp the hash realities of a pandemic world. Oh, to be a pet!

Sources

Sammi Blankstein – 847-337-2733

Tessa Kauppila – 847-915-5612

Jamie Stummer – 614-531-0905

Claire Wiechart – 312-402-0482