

This may be the most personal column I ever share. In mid-July, my wife Sharon and I lost our beloved Cavalier King Charles Spaniel Romeo.

He was just 9 months old and we could never have imagined how quickly something so small and rambunctious could grab hold of our hearts like he had.

The pain and shock are still fresh enough to feel like jagged rips to our hearts and the emptiness and stillness in our house is enormous. I know many people have experienced this, too.

We got Romeo shortly after our 14-year-old Golden-dor Kate passed away. We had Kate since she was a pup, too. She made occasional trips to Raleigh to visit her department friends and was a steady and gentle companion. She was family. Age had slowed her gait, but she enjoyed her Golden years and was perfectly content to take naps whenever the opportunity arose.

Her death also left an emptiness and sadness, but we comforted ourselves knowing she had a good life and that in passing, she was free of the ailments of old age.

We weren't looking to get another dog right away, but Sharon saw Romeo's face on a website, showed him to me and the next thing I know, we had a tri-colored puppy that was filled with a love for everybody, a pure joy of life and endless energy. Sharon and I loved everything about this dog from his floppy ears to his wiggly tail.

If there is such a thing as love at first sight, Romeo was it.

A new puppy means a new routine and of course the training that comes with it. Romeo was super smart, and he quickly had us trained to HIS routine and needs. He loved riding in the car, always wanted to be with us and couldn't get enough of sitting in our lap at the end of the day. Never would I have thought we'd be saying good bye so soon.

The short version of what happened to Romeo is that he ate something he shouldn't have and it created a blockage in his intestine. To this day we don't have any idea where he got the item or what it was, it did not look familiar to us.

The reason I wanted to share this story is to thank the many veterinarians, office staff and N.C. State veterinary students who showed us so much professionalism, compassion and kindness during this ordeal. He was seen and treated by our hometown veterinarian Dr. Joseph Kinnarney with Reidsville Veterinarian Hospital and by Dr. Valery Scharf at the N.C. State Veterinary Hospital.

Dr. Kinnarney ordered an x-ray to look for a blockage, but that didn't show anything. After a few days of observation and care, but no improvement, Romeo was admitted to the N.C. State Veterinary Hospital in Raleigh.

Dr. Scharf found the blockage using sonogram equipment. It was quickly decided to do surgery to try to remove the blockage and any damage it had caused. The blockage was not in the best location, which limited the amount of compromised tissue that could be removed.

Dr. Scharf advised us it would be touch and go following the surgery, so we prayed and worried over our sick dog, hoping for a miracle. Romeo spent four days in ICU at the vet hospital and Sharon and I cannot say enough good things about the care he received or the concern that everyone showed to us.

Dr. Scharf talked to us many times during the night of the first surgery, keeping us abreast of the situation and how Romeo was doing, but fully knowing the pain we were feeling. She was kind and caring beyond measure. That's pretty amazing, especially knowing she likely goes through scary and terrible things such as this with distraught pet owners every day.

We were hoping to see improvement following the surgery, but everyone had been honest and upfront with us about the challenges ahead. On Thursday, I headed over to the hospital knowing that this would likely be the day I would have to make the difficult decision.

As I was sitting in my truck thinking about what was ahead, my phone rang and it was Dr. Scharf. She told me she didn't want to make a decision without checking things one more time to see if anything else could be done. So we agreed to one more surgery, hoping beyond hope for that last-minute miracle.

But there was nothing missed; nothing that could be done differently. Everything that could have been done had been done. In the end, Romeo died peacefully, which is all any of us can hope for.

Having gone to N.C. State University and working closely with the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences leaders as Agriculture Commissioner, I have always known about the outstanding reputation of the vet school and teaching hospital. It makes me proud that it is recognized as one of the top vet hospitals in the nation, and now I know why. They have the cutting-edge technology and people who are passionate, caring and committed to the best patient care.

The staff went above and beyond in their care for Romeo. That is a credit to Dr. Sarah Musulin, ER Director, and Dr. Steve Marks, Clinical Care and Internal Medicine/Associate Dean and Director of Veterinary Medical Services. I want to congratulate D. Paul Lunn, Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine at N.C. State University for having such outstanding people throughout the program.

It is also encouraging to me to see the next generation of veterinarians who are training at N.C. State. Many of the ICU caregivers are vet students and I am glad to know we have such compassionate people going into veterinary medicine.

I want to personally thank everyone responsible for Romeo's care from beginning to end. We will always have our memories of Romeo running, playing and joyfully living life and we will forever be grateful to everyone at Reidsville Veterinary Hospital and N.C. State Veterinary Hospital for the outstanding care he received. The people who worked on him were absolutely amazing.

Run free, Romeo, and tell Kate hi from us.

