

Generations

The robotic pup or cat

As a pet lover, I know that there's no greater comfort than the companionship of a dog or cat to brighten up one's life.

But there are people who are unable to have either, such as those prone to allergies, residence constraints or those who travel constantly and know it isn't fair to the pet that needs interaction with its human.

So when I saw an article recently on www.nbcnews.com about Tombot, the robot that moves, barks and looks precisely like man's and woman's best friend, I couldn't help but watch the video that accompanied the article. Tombot is amazing.

The robotic dog was invented by Tom Stevens, CEO and co-founder, and the California-based company had just finished another kick-start fundraising effort. The goal was \$20,000 — they raised \$60,000. Product availability is set for August 2020, and pre-orders are available.

Sure, Tom's robotic dog is soft and cuddly, but it was made for a specific purpose other than its cuteness. Tom's mother, Nancy Stevens, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2011, and as he assumed control over her day-to-day affairs, there were many difficult days ahead. Tom admits that the worst day was when he realized he had to take away his mother's dog, Golden Bear.

Golden Bear was a 2-year-old goldendoodle, a beautiful dog with ordinarily a very sweet dispo-

sition. As Tom's mother's disease state worsened and her universe of friends and activities shrank, Golden Bear became an increasingly important companion for coping



Peg DeMarco

with her loss of independence. However, his mother became resentful of needing live-in assistance and managed to train Golden Bear to be aggressive toward her caregiver.

Fortunately, Tom had close family friends who could provide a new home for Golden Bear, but losing her dog was devastating to his mother.

Tom then began what would become a multi-year research exploration into the science of emotional attachment, especially as it relates to relationship formation with pets.

Along the way, he learned a great deal about dementia, behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia, psychotropic and anti-psychotic drugs, emotional-attachment objects, doll therapy and robot therapy. Convinced it was possible to do something really worthwhile for his mother and other seniors with dementia, he launched Tombot in 2017.

Loneliness is certainly a big problem for middle-aged and older adults, with a 2018 survey finding that about one-third of adults older than 45 feel lonely. And more than

20 percent of people 60 or older are affected by neurological and mental disorders, including dementia — which can trigger depression and anxiety along with cognitive problems.

Research has linked animal-assisted therapy to improvements in mood and the quality of life for seniors, including those with dementia. The jury's still out on whether robotic pets are as effective as their flesh-and-blood counterparts, but a recent review of studies on robopets for dementia patients linked time spent with the robots to lower levels of depression and agitation.

And since they don't need walks, food or veterinarian visits, cuddly automatons like Tombot are considered a low-maintenance option for people who are no longer able to care for a pet.

Tombot is not a new idea. In 2015, an innovation team was formed at Hasbro to focus on a void of products to bring fun and play to the older-adult market.

It branded the product Joy for All Companion Pets and began with felines in December 2015. Stories and testimonials from caregivers on the positive impact on isolation, loneliness and all forms of cognitive decline continued to validate what the team had believed all along — that the power of play was relevant at all stages of life.

After the initial success of the cat, the Companion Pet Pup was introduced in 2016. The early results

were encouraging, and it became clear that 100 percent focus on the older-adult population was required to maximize impact and achieve scale in a growing market.

In May 2017, the Joy for All leadership team left Hasbro and founded Ageless Innovation, successfully executing a friendly spinoff acquisition of the Joy for All brand and business.

Within Ageless Innovation, the Joy for All brand continues to comfort the older-adult market, with a focus on improving quality of life for aging loved ones, their families and caregivers.

Tombot's pup will retail for \$500 and be available in August 2020, but you can pre-order before its release date for \$299 via www.tombot.com (I'm tempted even though I have three real dogs — it's so adorable).

Ageless Innovation's "Joy for All" cats and dogs are less realistic, but available now at www.joyforall.com, and cost around \$120. Only cats are sold on Amazon, and 83 percent of the reviews were good: "Kitty meows, purrs, turns over, eyes move, ears move. Cat has attitude."

Everyone agrees on one thing in all that I studied about robot pets: Robot companions should be used to supplement interactions with loved ones and caregivers — not replace them.

Peg DeMarco is a Morganton resident who writes a weekly features column for The News Herald. Contact her at pegdemarco@earthlink.net.