

community supports aid funds. More than 60 per cent of respon-

Robert Williams and Zebedee



'I thought that I could never own a pet because I could barely look after myself. It didn't really worry me that I missed a meal or had to sleep rough. But I felt that I couldn't inflict such an erratic lifestyle on a domestic animal,' explained Robert Williams.

His description of his life as erratic is an understatement. Until recently, Robert had moved from place to place, often squatting.

When Robert was offered Zebedee as a pet, he agreed because he believed that she was the one animal he was capable of looking after. She is a companion who seldom complains that the accommodation is not five star or that the food is not *haute cuisine*. As a companion, Zebedee is as faithful as any dog and as playful as a kitten.

Just as Robert lives the life of a gypsy, without somewhere to call home, he has given a home to an habitually itinerant animal that is usually shunned by humans. Rats have seldom had good press.

Robert Williams' build is ever so slight. His voice is wafer thin, but if you listen carefully you can still hear a public school accent. As we sat talking, Robert had a disconcerting habit of avoiding eye contact.

Robert received Zebedee from a friend. She was a laboratory rat, discarded because she was suspected of having cancer. Several months after he obtained Zebedee, she did develop a tumour. While not exactly flush, Robert did not hesitate to hand over \$100 to the vet, who successfully operated to remove the malignant growth.

As we talked, Zebedee scurried around the room, exploring and playing with a plastic bag lying on the kitchen floor, just like a playful puppy. Having a rat for a pet

A Pet Story

Harry Blutstein

does have its drawbacks. According to Robert, Zebedee likes to gnaw through electrical cables and she will eat anything, including household chemicals, which make her sick.

Cheap to feed, Zebedee lives on a diet of brown rice and corn. As a special treat, she is given fetta cheese. Other than dining on inexpensive food, the cost of keeping Zebedee is zero.

In the places that Robert has stayed, other squatters also kept rats, for much the same reason as he does. Other pets that were mobile enough to live in squats were ferrets and a ring-tailed possum.

In winter, squats can get cold. Very cold. On such nights, Zebedee sleeps curled up against the soles of Robert's feet to find some warmth and comfort.

Living in squats is quite a different

world from Robert's childhood in middle class suburbia. 'When I was a kid, we always had cats and dogs, but they meant very little to me,' he explains. 'They were just another possession, and I took them for granted.'

As I looked around Robert's small bedroom filled with his modest possessions, it is clear that the complacency and security of childhood are long gone. It is therefore not surprising that Robert values the uncritical affection he receives from Zebedee, who is one of the few constant things in his life.

'At the moment, Zebedee is probably the only thing that I really love,' confesses Robert, looking fondly into her eyes as he cuddles her, 'she is my best friend'. As I watch Zebedee scuttle into Robert's shirt, it is quite evident that the feeling is mutual.