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KRT ILLUSTRATIONS

What child hasn't grown up wanting to own a pet? I've had a dog (a mixed breed poodle who needed a home when his family had to migrate overseas) and a cat (who followed me around at the old Bangsar mamak stalls until I couldn't resist taking him home), and they were both the awesomest companions to have until the day they died (of natural causes, in case you were wondering). True, it hurt like hell when they passed on but the little joys they afforded while they were around still warm the heart when I think of them.

Research has shown that living with pets provides certain health benefits. According to an article on WebMD, pets can help lower blood pressure, lessen anxiety and boost our immunity to infection. James E Gern MD learnt through his analysis of the blood of babies immediately after birth and one year later, that if a dog lived in the home infants were less likely to show evidence of pet allergies – 19% versus 33%. "Dogs are dirty animals and this suggests that babies who have greater exposure to dirt and allergens have a stronger immune system," says Gern.

There have also been studies that show Alzheimer's patients have fewer outbursts if there is an animal in the home. And pet owners with AIDS are far less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets. In another study, stockbrokers with high

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blood pressure who adopted a cat or dog had lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations than did people without pets.

And, as popular culture has shown, pets can help you socially and may even get you dates or strengthen a relationship with a loved one. (Refer to movies like *Must Love Dogs*, *Marley & Me*, *You've Got Mail*, and so on).

Beyond health and companionship, famous pets in history have shown that they can play an even bigger role – after all, greater men have greater needs. For some, a pet is a security blanket. Everywhere that former renegade army general Laurent Nkunda of the Democratic Republic of Congo went, his pet goat Betty was sure to go. Others have seen a pet as a political sounding board. US President Warren Harding's dog had his own chair at cabinet meetings ("is one bark a yay or nay Laddie Boy?"). An important member of staff, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's cat Humphrey was named official mouser to the cabinet office in 1986, saving the British government thousands of pounds in extermination fees each year.

For US president Harry Truman, his dog was his only friend (he famously said, "If you want a friend in Washington, get a dog"), while "a little dog Checkers" helped US vice-presidential hopeful Richard Nixon, who in 1952 was under scrutiny for accepting slush fund contributions from California supporters, seem friendlier and secure a nomination ... well, we all know how that ended.

British prime minister Winston Churchill was a famous animal lover and even had quite a collection of pigs. "I like pigs," he once said. "Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals." While it's safe to say that not many of our own politicians would agree with him, Churchill did also love cats, especially his ginger cat Jock. In his will, he instructed that his estate Chartwell should never be without "a marmalade cat named Jock". Jock IV is currently in residence.

Speaking of cats, our dear Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak recently acquired an orange and white Persian, which he confessed on his lMalaysia blog to be a "spur-of-the-moment buy" as he was "instantly taken with this cuddly creature". His entry, dated June 18, is accompanied by a picture of our premier gazing adoringly at his kitten, and includes an invitation to the rakyat to suggest names for it.

This reminds one of president Barack Obama asking the American people help his daughters pick out a dog and later name the presidential pup. Fifty-thousand people signed a petition to plead that the US First Family pick up a dog from a shelter.

Back here, four animal lovers politely admonished the PM for paying RM650 for the kitten. "The SPCA has hundreds of abandoned pets to be given away and gets little if any government funding at all to take care of them," commented Ken on www.lmalaysia.com.my. Plenty did suggest names though, quite a few with the same ideas. In the running currently is SAMA (which means equal/same and is inspired by SA-tu MA-laysia, as explained by the contributors), Tuah (which means luck and apparently a lot of them feel Najib needs it) and Bijan, which is the Malay word for sesame and Najib spelt backwards.

Some with much time on their hands have come up with OneMac (One Malaysia Cat) and JiRo (a mash-up of Najib and Datin Seri Rosmah's name) which sounds too close to "zero" so I think it's not a good idea. And then there are those clearly with issues who suggested the kitten be called lPussy, Banyaklagimasalahrakyat, Mahathir and Bersih.

Well, whatever the kitten's name turns out to be (at press time it had not yet officially been named), let's wish the PM the best of time with the little puss and hope that it is able to cater for whatever great need our leader has.