Interview with Louise (pseudonym) – Pet pig keeper.

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Researcher [K]

K: can you tell me about your pig?

P: Yeah so we got her a little over a year ago, when we first got her she was about a month old. We picked her up and brought her home. Initially, she had a little pen area in her living room and refused to go to sleep unless one of us was in the pen with her, she would get upset. So, the first month, she slept in the pen and then after that, we moved her into our bedroom because we weren’t going to sleep in the pen anymore. It wasn’t happening! So, I think bonding with us, she bonded with us a lot just because of the time we spent with her in that capacity. She did have an outside area that she would go in during the day, and then when we were at home, she would come in the living room with us and be pretty much under our feet the whole time. Then a few months ago we extended her pen to be pretty much half the backyard. Then we created the conservatory we have to be her inside area because in the winter and stuff she gets a lot of mud everywhere. So, she can have the conservatory inside and then the outside area. I think since we’ve done that, she’s been begrudging that she can’t spend the whole evening with us. I still do go into the pen with her and play until she goes to sleep, and she still needs that to some degree, that human contact. Not being alone at night. So, that’s kind of been the medium we’ve found that works for us, she is still getting used to it but I think it will work long-term.

K: What’s her name?

P: [Elsie]

K: That’s sweet, how old is she?

P: She turned a year in May, so little over a year.

K: What made you want to get a pet pig?

P: When I was a kid my neighbour had a pig and ever since then, since I was like 8 I wanted one, so that was the main reason.

K: What is it about pigs in particular that attracted you to them?

P: Erm, I don’t know, I just kind of always liked them when I was little. So, like a favourite animal. They are smarter than a lot of animals. Like, we’ve taught her to paint so I like to do that with her. I like that you can use their knowledges and what they can learn to do activities with them, stuff you might not be able to do with other animals as much.

K: where did you get her from?

P: we got her from Derbyshire micro pigs

K: Did you pick them out specifically?

P: Yeah, so, originally, we picked her out from pictures online. Then we went and met her, and it was between her and one other one. She is black and white and she has two black ears, and it was between her and a pink one. My husband didn’t really want a pink one. I think it kind of ended up being his input that swayed the decision.

K: She looked a bit different?

P: Yeah

K: Did you have to get in contact with DEFRA or anything?

P: yeah, so we had to contact them and let them know we were getting one, and get a CPH number. A county parish holding number, just to make it legal.

K: So, how did you describe your relationship with [Elsie]?

P: Erm, I would consider her almost like a child in a way because she relies on us a lot for affection. She really craves that human connection. She will automatically, when you sit down, want to come over and cuddle you. When you get up she follows you. So, you have to make sure she is fed multiple times in the day and even... the way she is connected to us in terms of reliance, and she looks for comfort to us. So, in that was a similar relationship that you would have with a child.

K: How do you think she perceives her relationship with you?

P: erm, I think she considers us like someone that feeds her, but I also think there is more to it than that. There was one time where I was away for a week and my husband. The moment I got back she ran from the backyard and was so happy to see me. Like, like a deeper relationship than just food.

K: Does she display that she has an emotional bond with you in other ways?

P: Erm, yeah, so even like... so she is really friendly with people in general, but specifically us. So, if we have people over she will always sit next to us, get cuddles from us. You can tell she gravitates towards us rather than other people if she has the choice. Once she is comfortable with them, she does sometimes go for affection from them but she always comes back, check in with us, then go about and go see other people.

K: So. How much of your daily routine is involved in caring for her?

P: Erm, I mean it bounces between me and my husband so I'll take a day where he does it. On a day where I would do it, in the morning we would wake up, go out into the conservatory. I usually look to make sure she’s awake, or I wait until she wakes up. When she’s awake I go in, make her breakfast. Sometimes it’s cereal, sometimes it’s oats, sometimes it’s yoghurt. Just different things. We do give her a lot of fruit and vegetables. But in the morning, it’s normally porridge with a lot of fruit in it, or cereal with like coconut milk. Then after that we would go and put her in her pen. She has like a little hut out there and we have just extended it so we’re looking to redesign it. Erm, but she used to have a little paddling pool that would have like fruit and vegetables in that she could go and scavenge for. Erm, we would sometimes later in the day throw oats out for her in the grass to go and find. We have a walking license for her so we try and take her different places, like the beach, or the forest. So, she just loves to go out and do stuff. So, usually I try and do that if we have time. Then in the evening, usually when we are both home and we have time we let her out of the pen and she can have the whole backyard. So she can go explore and munch on grass in the pen, have free roam of the back yard. At that point we would also feed her dinner, sometimes that is leftovers from what we had. Sometimes it’s vegetables and fruit we cut up for her, or a salad, or whatever. Then at that point I go and sit in the conservatory, and she will eventually come in and she will want to sit and cuddle you and be in contact with you. So, I usually spend most of the evening spending like quality time with her. Making sure she’s not alone for too long, then usually, so we usually feed her about 6pm and about 9 or 10 I give her a little snack and hand feed it to her. She really likes that human contact so I try and do that to have like, a special moment with her. Not on a daily basis, but when I have time I'll do more activities with her like painting, or different things like that she can get into.

K: What kind of feelings do you associate with her?

P: Erm, I think like the most simple one would be like, love.

K: What does love mean in your relationship?

P: I think it means like, just connecting with her on a deeper level than... like a basic relationship, not just I feed you and take care of you. It’s like, when I am around you I feel happy and I can tell that she feels happy, for lack of a better way of describing that.

K: Do you think having her has impacted your own health and wellbeing?

P: Yeah. I mean, I think it’s kind of gone both ways. In some ways, it’s made me a lot happier, and that connection is really special, she is very independent minded so sometimes she is like “i’m not gonna listen to you, I know what you’re saying but I'm not going to do that!”. So, I think in certain moments it can be a challenge but overall, I'd say it is positive.

K: How has your life changed since you got her?

P: Er, I think it’s given like a focus. Before, if I had free time I wouldn’t have a focus, but now she has become a focus in where we’d go, if we were gonna do an activity with her. Like, make more time and intention to bond with her.

K: And do you actively build that bond then?

P: Yeah

K: Do you think you trust each other?

P: I. think so, she seems to trust us and I think like, I trust her with a lot of things, I wouldn’t trust her to be left alone in our entire house but I think there is a level of trust. She definitely does trust us.

K: Do you have other pets now or in the past?

P: So, yes and no. So, right now we don’t officially have another pet. My husband and his family’s dog is currently staying with us for an extended period of time so we kind of do, but technically don’t. In my life I;ve had two cats and three dogs. Then when I was younger, we had others, but those where the ones I was old enough to be involved with.

K: how do you think having a pig differs from having more usual pets like cats and dogs?

P: I think cats and dogs are a lot more willing to please, whereas pigs are a lot more independently minded, but then I think with that, pigs are more clever and they are almost... you can bond with them more on a human level than you can with a dog or a cat. I think a dog or a cat is you could love them you can cuddle them don't get that like same level of intelligence in a way .

K: right. so it's kind of like an almost human intelligence you’re referring to?

P: yeah I mean, I might... The cats and dogs we’ve had, they've been amazing pets, but I don't feel like I felt them as a child in the same way I do with a pig because of that level of knowledge and because of that

K: So how do they fit into your family as an almost childlike figure?

P: I think it took my husband a long time to get used to it. Some things that were difficult for him, I think for me... I'm at a point in my life where I would be ready for that, so to me it was natural, and it was... I liked it. I think my husband sometimes does have challenges with it though, but I think I think overall it's kind of... I was ready for it so I think to me it was a very positive change in our life.

K: How has your relationship with her changed over time?

P: I think the biggest difference is we used to allow the whole house so we did spend a lot more time with her when she was little. just because she was always under our feet, and I think then we had to be careful that we had to baby lock all of our cabinets because otherwise she would take everything out of them or, we even had like a cabinet that has a key in it, and if you didn't take the key out and put it in a drawer she would like get the key and she would turn it with her mouth and unlock the cabinet... so things like that. I think a lot more difficult when she was younger because we perhaps gave her that freedom. I think it's changed because we don't have.... she's not under our feet all time, which has its positives, but then I also think it's impacted like... you could tell she's been a little resentful for the last like month. You can see that change in her behavior but then she still, when you sit down, she still wants cuddles so there's like a level of “I'm not happy that you did this, I also I want the time with you “. So, it's been a little bit more strained in the last month, that's mostly because of that big change that we've done

K: yeah, and do you think kind of having a pig as a pet changes people's perceptions about them as animals?

P: yeah, I think with some people... I mean you get really drastically different opinions. if we take her for a walk, some are really excited to see her. always want to ask questions and always really interested and there's people like, “you’re walking her!?” like they are, just like in shock. I think there's a little bit of it, but I think there's still some people that like make jokes about like “oh will you eat her?” things like that and you're like, no she's a pet. People just don’t change their mind, but then there are some people that walk away and think “oh I really want a pig as a pet now and I never really considered that”. So, I think it goes both ways.

K: Do your friends and family understand the relationship you have with her?

P: I think some of them do, I know so my parents they live in the US and we live here in the UK, I think my parents really understand because they know me really well. Yeah, I think my husbands parents have a little bit harder time understanding it so it's just depends on the the people...

K: Yeah. And um has she ever been unwell at all?

P: she's not ever been like really, like really, really sick. Well, she did have a like a period of maybe two days where she didn't wanna eat or didn't want to drink water and we kind of started to worry about her. We took it at the vet and then the next day she was eating again and they didn't do anything so, I don't... it might have just been she ate something that upset her tummy yeah we don't really know what went on but that's been the only thing that's kind of lean towards maybe not being good for a day or two. But yeah nothing drastic.

K: and what was the interaction with the vet like?

P: it was pretty good I mean it was very difficult to find one so that was a challenge in its own but we do live in an area that's slightly more country than like London, but we were able to find one within like 30-40 minutes of us. I mean we took her there it was slightly more difficult because we want to get her microchipped, we've called DEFRA where they said it's fine, but we talked to the vet nurse and she said we needed a written paper, so we contact DEFRA who said they’d do it and never did. So, I think like, things like that make it a lot more difficult to deal with, because they're like we need to make sure this is OK, we need to make sure this is OK, 'cause they don't always look at them as a pet in the same way you would if you took a dog or cat to the vet. So, there’s been things that have been difficult with that, but I think overall the vet was really nice and it was like a normal vet experience.

K: And do you have provisions for what happens if you’re away for extended periods?

P: Yeah, so we originally had a friend who woul watch her when we were away who was from the next village to us. Um, the last couple times she hasn’t been available. So sometimes we take her on vacation with us if we can. Or we have my husband's family watch her, so a multitude of different things because people are really terrified of the concept of that, looking after this pig. They get really stressed about it because they don’t have experience in the same way they do with a dog or cat. So, sometimes that can be tough trying to find someone but I think we’ve done the best we can in that scenario. We have a couple of different fallback options, there is a place you can take her for like daycare and you have to pay for a certain amount of time. That’s like, our backup option.

K: Are there any other stories or anything that could give me kind of insight into the meaning that she has for you?

P: I'm sure there is I think I just need a minute to think of some, or what the best one would be.

K: that's alright, take your time

P: I mean there is probably better than this, but the one is in my head at the moment. There was one day where I was really upset and I came home from work and it really bad day and my husband and I had like been arguing with it, just not a good day for anyone so then I like walked away and I went into the back room, this is when she still lived in the whole house, so she came in she found me and then she just curled up and like had lose contact with me in a way that... but usually she wants to like sleep between your legs and cuddle with you in like smaller ways, but she like stuck her head like right in my neck and just like... and I think you could see that she knew that I needed that in that moment. So, I think there's a simple one, I'm sure there's other ones but that's just like the one that I can think of off the bat.

K: oh that sounds lovely so do you think she can kind of pick up on your emotions in that way?

P: yeah, I think sometimes that's a good thing and then sometimes she's like, “you’re upset, I'm not gonna be anywhere near you”. She definitely, she definitely knows and picks up on it regardless of what her reaction is to it

K: right yeah, and is there anything else that you'd kind of like to mention that we haven't spoken about about around the emotional relationship you can have with pigs?

P: I mean I think with her, compared to like the dogs and cats I've had, I feel like with her I want to do more activities, I want to make a time with her more focused. Which is really different from like a dog or cat. But like, with her, the relationship is a lot deeper because of that feeling they have, I want to make this time intentional and I know that you benefit from interaction and the ability to use your brain in a way that like, dogs and cats can do, but not on the same level, and not... they don't crave that in the same way that pigs do.

K: yeah. Are there challenges that you face in having specifically a pet pig that aren't present with other pets?  
  
P: Um, I think it would have been really beneficial to get another pig for her. I think she relies on us so much because we are like her herd. Being alone for her is really difficult. If we need to, we can leave her alone in the backyard for a day but we try not to because she gets very stressed out if we leave her alone for too long. Sometimes, when she gets stressed, she will try and destroy things. She will try and tear up the floor, or... she reacts really viscerally to being alone. Dogs and cats are like not the same, she reacts very very strongly when she is alone. If you’re in the living room and she can see you in the conservatory she will just scream her head off because she wants to be there with you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It can be a challenge, but you can also see how deeper connected she is to you in a way because of that reliance, she looks at you as family in a way that a lot of other animals don’t.

K: and um do you plan to have more pigs in the future or?

P: I would like to, but my husband probably never! I would probably get another one in a heartbeat. I think it would also be beneficial for her, but I also respect his wishes.

K: I’ve been speaking with some owners, kind of about what happens when a pig dies and the laws around what you can actually do with the body. Have you put much thought into that yet?

P: Because she’s so young, we haven’t yet. We have looked at like a basic level, so we know it's a lot more difficult to like bury them in your backyard in the same way that you could with like a dog or a cat. Yeah I haven't done so much a whole lot of research on what the options are because she's so young. So, I know that is like a hump that I have to overcome when that time comes, which I'm hoping because of her age isn't for a while, but you just...I mean you guess you never know what could happen. But no it's not something I put a lot of time more energy researching into at this point in time.

K: would you like to memorialize her in some way?

P: somewhere we could they probably at least do something like I don't know, something that I would always have of hers or like take a lock of her hair or something like a memorial in some way, yeah. I would have to look at what I could legally do in terms of like actual like burials and other things but I would like to do something in the future when it came.

K: And just to wrap up as well what's your favorite thing to do with her?

P: Um, I think on like a simple level, cuddling on are more in-depth level, I think my favourite activity would be painting because I really love painting, and she's really good at it, so she gets really into it. the results are really, really good. Like, I've looked at selling them because every time someone’s seen it.. like “no way she painted that, that's so cool”, like actually people say “oh I’d totally hang that up on my wall”. So, I think um I enjoy it because it’s also something I really enjoy doing even on my own, and if she enjoys it and I enjoy it and it’s something we can do together that cool. I have to sit there and hold the canvas for her so it’s at the right angle so she can get her nose to it. She will sit there and pick the colours and I love seeing her pick them, and she will pick which one she wants, You just see how smart she is and you see how much enjoyment she gets in it, and then you get the result of something that you can keep at the end of it.

K: that’s so sweet.