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The Magazine of Charlotte Harbor and the Gulf Islands



PUPPY LOVE

NEW DOGGIE DAYCARE CENTER LAVISHES ATTENTION ON HOME ALONE DOGS

—by Mary Alspaugh

Ah, it's the stuff personal-care dreams are made of. It starts with a morning filled with luxury, a long soak in a warm bath, a complete shampoo, style and blow-dry. A pedicure and massage. A total makeover.

Then it's off for a little exercise, followed by a specially prepared lunch. A little more exercise, the lights are dimmed, a soft, Zen-like music plays, and you're peacefully napping. Awakening brings more refreshments and more playful times with friends while awaiting a personal driver for the trip home, where you arrive tired but happy.

Nope, you're not at Miraval Spa in Sedona. You're on Tamiami Trail in Port Charlotte. And it's not even you. It's your dog. You are the chauffeur. And you just put in eight hours at the office.

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Your dog, however, has spent the day at Paws, a fledgling but thriving new business in town that caters to all manner of canine clients in a daycare setting.

Husband-and-wife owners Richard and Maki Witherill launched their doggie daycare business about five months ago

"THERE ARE NO BULLIES IN THIS SCHOOLYARD, AND WE DON'T HAVE ANY CAGES HERE,"

after perceiving a lack of luxury pet-sitting services in the area. There was no business that was equipped to cater to working owners who were reluctant to leave their dogs home alone for long stretches of time.

"Boarding a dog at a traditional kennel is perceived as almost medieval these days," said Richard Witherill. "Dogs are valued family members. People think of their dogs as their kids. That's the norm here. In a kennel, a dog is an inventory item. Here, they are my customers."

Doggie daycare at Paws begins each morning with check-in from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. Owners drop the dogs off with whatever accoutrements they might require, such as special toys, food or medications. It's the time they can make appointments for grooming services. Dogs are separated by size. Large dogs play together in "Big Hound Playground." Smaller pups spend much of their day in "Little Hound Town."

Each dog is assigned its own "cubby," where toys and treats are kept. Each compartment is labeled with the dog's own bar-coded picture ID card, provided by Paws for identification purposes and as a billing tool for additional services.

Many of Witherills' four-legged clients are purebred animals, but just as many are of mixed breeds, including the owners' own four dogs, all of them rescues. Their dogs serve as



Maki Witherill clips the last wisps of hair from a client's ear trim.

"temperament-testers" by being the first to be introduced to new dog clients.

The Witherills also have a foster dog from EARS, the Ears Animal Rescue Sanctuary serving Charlotte County.

A dog trainer and groomer, Witherill has been certified as a temperament tester for the AKC's Canine Good Citizen program, and he carefully screens new clients before taking them on as pack regulars.

"There are no bullies in this schoolyard, and we don't have any cages here," he said. "We temperament-test every new dog before putting him in with our regular clients. We test them all for food aggression, people- or dog-aggression, and any anti-social behavior for a full day, before we agree to admit them."

A few potential customers have had to be turned away because, Witherill said, he won't take any chances with potentially dangerous or antisocial dogs. Additionally, he won't accept dogs with epilepsy or those suffering from debilitating pain, as

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from severe arthritis.

The daily rate for daycare without additional services is \$15. Should a pup require it, the Witherills also offer complete grooming, which ranges from a basic bath to the "Pawdicure Package," "Summer Shave-down," and "Furminator De-Shedding Treatment."

And should that best friend need to stay overnight, PAWS offers sleep suites. To make the overnight stay more comfortable, the rooms include a platform bed, overstuffed dog pillow, toys, rugs, and food and water dishes. The glass-enclosed suites have no bars and each puts out the welcome mat that reads



Glass replaces bars on kennels at Paws for an open, friendly feeling.

"Wipe Your Paws." Including one day of pet sitting, an overnight stay runs about \$25.

Most people who enroll their dogs in PAWS are folks who like the idea that Fido or Fluffy will have a full day of fun and exercise, rather than an eight-hour nap at home, awaiting their arrival. Dog daycare is also valuable, says Witherill, for canines that are overweight, suffer from separation anxiety or who otherwise get into trouble if left to their own devices at home.

"People have a full life, but a dog is dependent upon its owner for everything: food, shelter, health care, grooming,



Dogs get toy time, exercise and a siesta, and then get up and do it all over again.



playing. It's all on the owner," Witherill said. "If your dog has been sleeping all day while you're at work, when you come, he's ready to play, interact. But you're tired, you need to eat dinner, relax, shower and get some sleep. You're lucky if you get a half-hour of quality time with your pet."

Daycare, Witherill said, alleviates some of the guilt an owner who must leave his dog all day might feel. Witherill's clients get loads of attention and exercise. And overweight dogs have been known to drop a few pounds after attending daycare and participating in the exercise sessions.

"These dogs have our full attention all day long," Witherill said. "When they leave here, they're tired, they've had a full day.

"Tired dogs are happy dogs," Witherill said. And that, he added, makes their owners happy, too. ♦