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Walking the dog has become a booming industry

By Melissa Dribben -- Inquirer Staff Writer



DAVID M WARREN / Inquirer
Bismark and Sunshine stand on either side of dog walker Gina Downs, the "pet nanny."

Last summer, Rebecca Davis and her boyfriend were at one of the outdoor tables at Vesuvio, at Eighth and Fitzwater, having coffee or wine or whatever, that's not the point. The point is that when she wasn't gazing lovingly into his eyes, she noticed a dog getting a short walk around a small park.

"The owners seemed disinterested," Davis recalls, "and the dog looked frustrated." Davis is a marathon runner. "I thought, that dog needs a run. Maybe I should start a dog running service."

Three days later, with her computer-savvy boyfriend's help, she set up a Web site for Run Philly Dog Run, offering, for \$40 an hour, to take dogs for a leashed cardio workout at their pace of choice.

Today, the 27-year-old research assistant at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia is running six to 10 dogs a week and hoping to turn her budding business into a full-time profession.

Over the last five years, the dog walking/pet sitting industry has grown exponentially. Young entrepreneurs have found profitable careers doing what used to be mere after-school chores that paid little more than change for popcorn and pinball.

The first person to respond to Davis' Web site was Zeth Weissman, who owns PhilaPets.com, one of Philadelphia's largest pet-sitting operations. Zeth and his wife, Deirdre, refugees from the dot-com bust, moved from Boston to Philadelphia in 2003. Deirdre was about to start veterinary school. Looking for a way to make a little money before classes started, she went to a dog park at 25th and Pine and casually asked around.

Did they need someone to walk their pets while they were at work or on vacation? "She started out with one," says Zeth Weissman. "Then another. The next thing we knew, she was walking 10 to 15 dogs a day."

Deirdre is now in her fourth year of vet school and Zeth works full-time running the company they formed in 2004. They employ 45 pet sitters and three full-time managers. On Christmas Eve alone, PhilaPets' crew cared for some 200 pets. Last year, their business grossed about \$650,000.

This year, Zeth Weissman says, "we're hoping to make a million."

Dog walking still does not rate its own classification from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Since many in it operate off the IRS radar, it would be difficult to obtain accurate numbers anyway.

"But anything related to companion animals is absolutely booming," says Henry Kasper, an economist in the BLS Office of Employment Projections. (He has a cat.)

Claudia Kawczynska, editor of the magazine *The Bark*, says the growing number of dog walking/pet-sitting franchises shows a clear trend.

Franchises of the national chain Fetch have opened in the city, Cherry Hill and Montgomery County. The company, founded in 2002, reports 1,000 "service areas" across the United States.

Dog walking, says Kawczynska, "has become one of the biggest growth areas in the pet sector."

Those who have been in the business for a while say increased competition is no problem. The demand for reliable animal-tenders willing to go out, even when the wind chill shatters the enamel on your teeth, is so great that there's room for all comers.

"It hasn't affected me one iota," says Richard Whiteside of Blue Beagle Promenade.

"I've actually scaled back," says Whiteside, 44, a former pet-store owner who has been walking dogs full time since 2002. "I'm very selective, and I don't advertise."

Prices among dog walkers vary, with higher rates for special services, such as Davis' one-hour one-on-one run, or animals with special needs, such as diabetic dogs that need insulin injections.

And not all dog walkers are equally skilled, says Wendy White, one of Whiteside's clients.

White, a former White House counsel under President Bill Clinton, used to live in the suburbs of Washington, where her children and their baby-sitters would walk the family's temperamental 90-pound Dalmatian, Bailey, during the day. In 1999, when she moved to Philadelphia to become general counsel for the University of Pennsylvania, she had to hire someone to do the job.

Bailey rejected three of the applicants. He refused to leave the house. Then the family heard about Whiteside.

"Richard comes in, sits at my kitchen table, eats his lunch," White recalls. "He feeds Bailey scraps." Afterward, the dog lets him take him for a walk.

"He does this every day for two weeks," she says, and when the courtship ends, Bailey is smitten. "I've been in his debt ever since."

Whiteside, she notes, also rescues his clients when they lock themselves out of their house. "He's always around."

Literally.

Self-employed dog walkers rarely get time off.