

Posted on Tue, Jan. 15, 2008

Walking the dog has become a booming industry

By Melissa Dribben -- Inquirer Staff Writer

"That's one of the rough parts of the business. You just work every day, and that's your life," says Gina Downs, the Pet Nanny.

Downs, who restricts her practice to the Art Museum area, says the responsibility is huge. "People trust you with the keys to their homes. And they trust you with their animals, who are like members of the family."

Last year, a tree fell on her car when she was in the midst of her appointed rounds. As soon as she was sure no bones had been crushed, she says, she was on the phone, arranging for her employees to get to the animals on her schedule.

"A lot of people try it, then get out," says Downs, who has watched a dozen operations come and go during her nine years in business.

"The work is physically grueling," says Anna Nagy, who lasted 18 months. Nagy, 36, who has a master's degree in public administration, was working as an associate director of a research center at Penn in May 2006 when she quit to become a dog walker. "I was looking for a different lifestyle," she says.

After a year of 15-hour days, she tried to hire someone to help share the burden, but found few she could count on.

"I was working so much," she said, "that I had no time to give the quality care I wanted to. By the 10th walk, you can't give the same attention to a dog that you'd like."

In September, she went back to work at Penn.

When the work fits, however, it can be glorious, says Davis, the dog runner. Particularly on a sunny week like last one, when she met Buckley, a 3-year-old South Philadelphia puggle, for their regular date.

She let him sniff around Cianfrani Park - the same spot across from Vesuvio where she had her dog-running inspiration. She steered him away from a candy wrapper he homed in on like a truffle. Then it was time to get his tail in gear.

"Come on, Buckley!" she said, and off they trotted - she with her fanny pack of plastic bags and a bottle of water, he with the inestimable privilege of an hour to just run.