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## Doggie day care

January 24, 2000

By: Omar Perez

After a few years as a computer graphics designer, Victoria Shaw dropped the mouse and followed another calling: dogs.

"I hated my job," Shaw says. "It was what my family thought I should do, and I wanted out."

That was 20 years ago. Now Shaw, 41, is the owner of A Dog's Day Out Spa, a Coral Gables business that provides not only dog-sitting but training services.

Before starting her business, she got the scientific credentials. Shaw attended the highly regarded veterinary school of Cornell University and worked for 10 years in South Florida as an animal behaviorist, helping pet owners whose dogs are over-aggressive, mark their territory on a favorite couch, or are overeager crotch sniffers.

Shaw's new business relies on the fact that dog-parenting is not always easy for busy owners. Keeping dogs active during the day means a good night's rest for the dog owners.

"The dogs get home and they're exhausted," she says. "I know a lot of times people get home and they're too tired from work to play with their dogs."

Says Bob Duffy, executive director of the American Dog Owners Association Inc.: "People are concerned about leaving their dogs in a kennel. Those people will find this kind of business useful."

Before dogs are allowed to stay at the dog day care, they are screened for their temperament. All the dogs also must be current on their shots.

Nancy Williams and her husband Brian own two mixed Labradors — Venus and Mars — that regularly stay with Shaw.

"When they turned 8 months old, trying to train both of them was a handful," says Nancy, who lives near Shaw's store. "We [work a lot of hours] and it's not a good situation to leave your dogs alone for that long. Destruction is bound to happen. Now they have built a trust with Victoria."

Venus and Mars were not available for comment.

Shaw spent about \$2,500 for equipment such as cages, dog toys and beds. She worked out of her home in the beginning, but the canines she cared for chewed up more than just their food. So she rents space one block off Le Jeune Road now.

Finding a place, however, wasn't easy. She spent 2 1/2 years searching for a place in Miami, but was ultimately told that her business would have problems meeting zoning codes. She chose the current location in Coral Gables after driving by and seeing a for-rent sign.

"I almost didn't stop," she says. "That was three months after being told I couldn't open one up in the city of Miami. I was very upset."

The owner of the property told her dogs were allowed, and Shaw opened her business three weeks later, after minor renovations like lighting and a

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fresh coat of paint. Shaw opened the store with a Halloween party where dog owners brought their costumed canines. Shaw also hosted a Christmas party where customers could have their dogs photographed on Santa's (presumably dry) lap.

Shaw says she needs five dogs a day to be in the black. So far she averages about that. She promotes her business mainly through flyers in pet stores and veterinarian clinics, though most customers for the dog sitting service are dog-training clients.

"The dog-training industry is booming," says Lynn Becker, executive director of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers.

Mixing day care and training can work, Becker says. "People that take their dogs to be looked after will probably want them trained as well."

A Dog's Day Out is open weekdays from 7 a. m. to 7 p. m. A day's stay costs \$33, and an optional pick-up or drop-off costs from \$5 to \$7 one way, depending on location. The business also offers five-day packages that can be used throughout a five-week period. Half-day dog care goes for \$25. The business is closed on weekends.

Shaw also plans to offer overnight boarding and grooming, as well as dog care classes to pet owners.

"I'm trying to educate people," she says. "I really believe in what I do. and I really believe it has some purpose."

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