

The Washington Times

May 21, 2004, Friday

Canine Companion Turns Day Camp into a Pet Party in Springfield, Va.

BYLINE: By Chris Baker

LENGTH: 909 words

Shawn Gibson is one lucky dog -- not to mention Top Dog -- at the Olde Town Pet Resort, a "day spa and hotel" for canines and cats in Springfield.

He spends most of each workday running, wrestling and playing catch with his charges. "I'm with them eight hours a day. I get to know them better than their owners do," he said.

The resort is located off Interstate 95. There is a "salon" where dogs -- and cats, too -- can get fluffed and buffed and have their claws trimmed. And there is an indoor pool. And there are spacious cages where the guests eat and sleep.

The staff includes a "veterinarian acupuncturist" and a masseuse.

"This is kind of a flipped world. It's 'The Twilight Zone.' You almost expect the people to be in the cages and the animals to be walking around the building," said Mr. Gibson, a dog lover who has worked at the resort about a year.

The resort charges \$ 35 a day for its popular "doggie day camp" service, where Mr. Gibson and one or two assistants spend the day playing with the dogs while their owners are at work.

It charges \$ 30 for a 30-minute swim for the dogs, \$ 30 for a canine massage and \$ 20 for a 20-minute one-on-one "play date" between a staffer and a pet.

Dog owners pay \$ 50 a day to kennel their pet in one of the resort's basic "hotel suites," a 3 1/2-foot by 5 1/2-foot cage. The cost includes three 20-minute walks; a cage near one of the building's big picture windows costs \$ 5 extra.

The most luxurious suite, a 5-foot by 12-foot cage, costs \$ 110 a night, including the cost of three 20-minute walks and a 20-minute playtime.

The grooming costs vary depending on an animal's breed and coat condition.

The resort's owners spent \$ 5 million building the three-level facility, which they bill in its brochure as "the most innovative pet resort in the nation." It opened in October 2002; the owners are scouting Montgomery County for a second location.

"The demand is there. There's no getting around that," Mr. Gibson said.

He arrived at work one day 30 a.m. and reviewed his schedule. The resort opened a half-hour later, and Mr. Gibson began greeting the dogs as their owners dropped them off for day camp.

"As soon as they see me, they break off from their owners and run to me.

It's a riot every morning," Mr. Gibson said.

He spends an hour or so calling potential clients to set up appointments, then evaluates dogs whose owners have signed them up for doggie day camp.

When evaluating a pet, Mr. Gibson gauges an animal's friendliness, how well it interacts with people and whether it is aggressive or not.

Come 10:30 a.m., it's playtime.

Roughly 30 dogs have shown up for day camp on this day. The bigger animals are assigned to a room in the building's second floor; the smaller puppies stay in a room on the ground floor.

Mr. Gibson likes the big dogs best.

"Go deep, Tucker. Go deep," he calls out before throwing a slobber-coated rubber ball to an Australian shepherd.

"Good boy. Good boy."

Playtime is an exercise in controlled chaos -- 15 big dogs, some racing around the room, others growling and nipping each other, all competing for Mr. Gibson's attention.

He doesn't ignore any of them.

"You want to wrestle Taylor? You want to wrestle?"

"That's a no-no Gina. You better hide from me."

"Tanner."

The room has big picture windows and a shiny tile floor. Mr. Gibson keeps a mop and bucket on hand in case one of the dogs has an accident.

The barking never stops.

"I can see their personalities come out of their eyes. I just like to understand how they communicate. It's like a hidden language going on in here."

Shortly before noon, Mr. Gibson decides to take the dogs outside to the "agility field," where they can romp around on brightly colored equipment designed especially for them.

Mr. Gibson moves his slender frame down a flight of steps and props open the door to the yard, then calls upstairs to a colleague in the playroom where the dogs are being held.

"Let 'em rip."

Fifteen dogs come barreling down the stairs, past Mr. Gibson, out the door and onto the field.

Mr. Gibson, 24, grew up in North Carolina and Alexandria alongside his grandmother's Siberian husky.

His mother had a pet cat but he never took much of a liking to it.

"Cats are just naturally sneaky," he said.

Mr. Gibson owns two dogs: a 13-year-old Labrador named Ebony and a 2-year-old pit bull named Kiko.

He was working a security job at Washington Dulles International Airport when he stumbled across an online news article about the construction of the **Olde Towne Pet Resort**. At the time, he was trying to find a trainer for his own dogs.

He contacted the resort's owners, who took a liking to him and hired him to be a canine swim instructor. Eventually, he was promoted to run the doggie day camp.

James McManaman, the **Olde Towne Pet Resort's** general manager, said Mr. Gibson has found his calling in working with animals.

He calls him "the dog whisperer" because he knows how to connect with the animals one on one.

In his spare time, Mr. Gibson dabbles in the local hip-hop music scene.

He hopes to one day work full time as a record producer.

For now, though, he's having a ball running the doggie day care.

"It's like a different party every day."

To see more of The Washington Times, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.washtimes.com>

LOAD-DATE: May 21, 2004

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

KR-ACC-NO: WT-PET-RESORT-20040521

JOURNAL-CODE: WT

Copyright 2004 Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News
Copyright 2004 The Washington Times