

Local Canine Companies are Going to the Dogs, and Loving it

BY STEPHANIE HORTON

SHELTON LIFE

Nancy Winchel and Evie Bradford are going to the dogs, literally. And they are proud of it. They both specialize in the caring world of canine care, which requires them to take their businesses on the road.

Winchel owns "Creature-Care," an in-home pet and house sitting service, and Bradford's expertise takes her to the other end of the pet care business. Appropriately named "Lawndoodles," Bradford's one-line description says it all — "erasing your pet's unwanted artwork."

Although these local entrepreneurs don't work together officially, they do collaborate on occasion, providing an appreciative car or business referral, something key to both of their businesses. "We met through this business," Winchel says, "and we refer back and forth, depending upon the need."

CREATURE CARE

Winchel's Creature Care



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Evie Bradford's daily poofer scooper patrol takes pet care to the next level, and benefits the environment at the same time.

offers in-home care for pets from birds and fish to dogs and horses. "I am not a kennel," she clarifies for those looking for a place to drop the family pet on their way to the airport. Rather, she goes to people's homes, helping people keep their pets at home, even when they are away.

"Cats are great for home sitting, as it is not easy to kennel a cat," she says. Winchel points out that many people have more than three or four cats, and having in-home care is a less expensive option than taking them to a kennel. "I can clean out boxes and feed them for a fraction of what it would cost to take them to a kennel," she says. Let alone the obvious, "Cats aren't very easy-going about going anywhere in a carrier," she laughs.

Winchel exemplifies the term "value added" with her approach to customer service. "I can provide the homeowner with a sense of security while they are away by checking on the homes, changing lights, bringing in the paper and mail, bringing up the shades, really whatever they want," she

says.

"This all comes in addition to the animal care, and is much appreciated, especially for those who are gone for weeks at a time. Sometimes Winchel even offers overnight care, depending upon the client's needs. She recently spent a couple of weeks at a horse farm just outside of Groton. They wanted somebody for security reasons to be there and take care of the horses, dogs, cats and goats," she explains.

In addition to the expected duties of feeding the animals, cleaning up after them, and walking them, Winchel can also administer medications and vitamins. She also stays for playtime, which she admits is one of the benefits of her trade.

"Pets are like family," she says. "We pride ourselves on giving that individual love and attention that they are used to on a day-to-day basis." This attitude may be a contributing factor to Winchel's success. "A lot of our customers either don't have kids or their kids are grown, and they consider their pets their children."

And that means treating the various homes with the utmost care and respect as well. Winchel's customers are used to her "get it done" ways, and can depend upon her, even if something goes wrong. "If I see something that needs to be done, I do it. I replaced the flag at the horse farm; I just couldn't stand to see it all tattered," she explains.

When it comes to business challenges, Winchel says sometimes the weather can be a problem, but coming from Michigan, she has seen worse. A more likely challenge is the effort it takes — sometimes — to convince potential clients why it is important to have a professional care for their pets. "We are a licensed, bonded business, unlike the kid across the street," she says. And then there is the experience of working with animals through and through, a sense of responsi-



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Nancy Winchel has such fun with her canine clients, she considers it more like visiting family than work.

bility and common sense in general.

For example, during a recent windstorm, one of Winchel's clients was out of the country when a big tree came down in their yard, taking out the power. "The client put it in my hands to make all of the arrangements," she said. "I'd like people to know that it pays to have a professional on duty. This isn't a whim, it is my business."

LAWNDOODLES

When it comes to the other end of the canine care business, Evie Bradford has it covered. Her "poofer scooper" business, creatively called Lawndoodles, is a growing, growing concern.

"Most people don't know that poofer scooper businesses exist," Bradford says. "I wish people understood how bad pet waste is for the environment, especially since we live so close to the water."

Bradford's lawndoodles go to Mason County Garbage and Recycling where they are treated and disposed of within state guide-

lines. "It takes years for it to break down; that is why it has to be properly disposed of, even in our rainy climate," Bradford explains. "Do not put it in your septic system either," she emphasizes, as these systems are designed according to the number of occupants in a house, and will become overwhelmed.

Bradford's poop pickups happen on a weekly schedule, sometimes two to three times a week. "I generally let myself in and out, and bring the waste home with me, while Mason County Garbage and Recycling picks it up," she says.

Make no mistake, picking up poop is serious business. While there are no ordinances in place in Mason County, Thurston and Kit-sap counties do have such regulations about scooping up after pets.

According to the Mason Conservation District, more than 19,000 dogs live in Mason County, producing waste equivalent to a city of 4,800 people. They estimate that more than five tons of dog waste is dropped in

Mason County backyards every day.

They also note that pet waste is a contributing cause of bacterial contamination of Mason County waterways (an estimated 20 creeks and 34 marine areas), which can make swimming, beachcombing and shellfish harvesting unsafe.

While Mason County Garbage & Recycling requires pet waste to be "double bagged," Bradford "triple bags" her lawndoodles, just to be extra safe. "People are always asking me how I got into this," Bradford says. "The first poofer company started in 1976 in Denver, and somewhere along the line I heard about it." Bradford was working at the Mason County Jail at the time, where she worked for 14 years. "I recall hearing from someone say that if you do something like you, you won't hate going to work every day," and I love dogs."

Bradford knew that she didn't want to start a kennel business, but wasn't sure what to do. "I wanted something permanent that I could sell later on, something that I could own." Eventually she let her job at the jail go. "I like to say I take less 'crap' now than I did then," she laughs, and quoted — "it's all worked out and I'm happy with it."

Since Bradford's startup in 2005, Lawndoodles has grown to include 80 customers, usually private residences, but some commercial clients, such as homeowners associations or breeders. When it comes to commercial accounts, the reasons vary, Bradford says. "It is a breeder, they just can't keep with it, they have other things to do." Another trend is businesses that allow employees to bring dogs to work, which includes one of Bradford's clients. Just one more reason she is considering hiring someone to help out, soon.

For information, visit www.lawndoodles.com.