



Business

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Pet-sitter makes friends (two- and four-legged)



Doug Hood Photos

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TOMS RIVER - Gooch the pooch, an 8-year-old black sharpei, and Marsha Nitko have definitely bonded.

Nitko owns Paw-Ferred Pet Sitting here. Gooch, also known as Ju Ju, seemed happy to see Nitko making her usual rounds at his owner's home in Bayville Tuesday.

Nitko was hired seven months ago by Gooch's owner, Marilyn Roberts, to walk the dog, check his water and food, give him treats and play with him for about a half an hour, once a day every weekday and on weekends when needed.

Roberts is a lead business development specialist at Fort Monmouth. She said she can now relax knowing that Gooch's needs are being met while she's at work.

"God, it's been a lifesaver. Actually now I can work without hyperventilating, without worrying about the dog having to go out. I walk him at 5 in the morning and the earliest I get home at night is 5:30 so that's a long day for him," Roberts said.

Roberts lives with her mother, Lucy Jones, in Holiday City South, Berkeley, but Roberts said it is not safe for her mother to walk the dog.

"She had a quadruple bypass (two years ago) so I really don't want her take the dog out. He does pull if he sees another animal. She'll be 80 in December. Since Marsha's there, (Gooch) is getting out, he's getting his walk. I don't have to worry about him

pulling her or mom falling," she said.

"I was looking and looking for someone to do this, even someone local in the neighborhood. I would even pay them every day, but there was no one available. Then I heard about Marsha," she said.

"It's been great. I was putting him in a kennel for weekend business trips. Now he can stay in his own home...It's wonderful. I don't have to worry about him not eating. He's in his own environment."

Jones said she is also pleased with the arrangement. "It's been wonderful. Marilyn's hours are so long that he needs this in-between care," Jones said. "And she (Nitko) has become a really close family friend. She understands animals, really, she's amazing."

Nitko said she documents the time she spent with the animal and any problems she may have noticed, such as ear infections or swollen glands. She also works in conjunction with the Toms River Veterinary Center. "They do their own boarding, but if the animal is too old for the kennel, they refer them to me," she said.

Nitko is certified in pet first aid and CPR through the American Red Cross and the Humane Society, and is registered and bonded through Pet Sitters International. She recommends that anyone considering using a pet-sitting service get a certified sitter trained through an organization like PSI. "PSI promotes public education and awareness and offers training for people getting into pet sitting," she said.

Nitko said the professional pet-sitting business started in the United States in 1982 but has blossomed recently, in part due to television publicity.

She travels throughout Toms River, Bayville, Beachwood, and Pine Beach and as far away as Lakehurst and Whiting. She said she once pet-sat for ten cats and a dog in Bayville.

Nitko, who is a licensed clinical social worker, worked in that field for 20 years. She was the director of various mental health programs before her job was

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eliminated through downsizing.

"It was the impetus for me to get into another career," she said. Nitko had the help of Lynn Ribaud, co-owner of All the Perks in Silverton. Ribaud is a counselor with the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), an organization giving free advice to people who are starting their own business. Ribaud is passing on the advice she got from SCORE members.

"We went over her business plan and helped with the financial (aspects) ... helped her to see how she could make money ... how many she would have to do in a day to break even," Ribaud said.

"It's worked out very well for me. I'm my own boss, and I have two assistants, mature women who have been in other businesses," Nitko said. Her assistants are Jane Bartone and Tori Matluk.

Gooch is one of many animal

friends Nitko has made since she started Paw-Ferred Pet Sitting approximately a year ago. In one year, she has taken care of animals of all kinds, shapes, sizes and ages, including a monkey in Bayville.

Nitko has a 12-year-old dachshund named Ricky. He was an abused pet that she rescued from a kennel in South Brunswick when he was a year old.

"Nobody wanted him. He was antisocial and fearful. It took me about six months, but I got him to be social, and he turned out to be a wonderful dog," she said.

She said her family members, including her 8-year-old daughter Michelle, were not initially in favor of her new job.

"My family originally thought I was quite nuts, but they are very supportive now, and are getting educated along with the rest of the public," she said. "They thought it was a wild idea but now they are very happy for me and think it's a great idea and are right behind me."

For more information on Paw-Ferred Pet Sitters, call (732) 349-3500.



Marsha Nitko (right) owner of Paw-Ferred Pet Sitting, with client Lucy Jones and her pet sharpei, Gooch.