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Hunter is hunted by people with pets. Pet sitter offers vacationers option to kenneling



Kerri Hunter shows off the plaque she received as the first inductee into the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters hall of fame. She also received a crystal inscribed piece (to the left) and other prizes.

by Debbie Szmowski

Kerri Hunter's job has gone to the dogs. Really.

It wasn't axed by corporate greed and she wasn't "downsized."

It's just that the business this self-described animal lover started as "Kerri's Cat Care, pet and housesitting," in May of 1988 unleashed to include all types of animals, including many of the canine persuasion.

"When I originally went into business I didn't have any intention of dealing with dogs," Hunter said. "I was going to do strictly cat care."

Hunter found she was barking up the wrong tree. "I broke that rule immediately," she said, "and I'm glad I did."

Hunter's work, in an expanding industry that includes over 1,000 members but once had to fight to be listed under "P" in telephone directories, was recently recognized by her peers. She just returned from the annual National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS) convention in Dallas, TX with a new addition to her nine-cat litter: induction into NAPPS's Hall of Fame.

"I call it the Pet Sitter of the Year Award," Hunter said proudly. "What's really special about this award is that it's the first year NAPPS has done a national award."

Hunter was nominated by her peers. Knowing her colleagues thought that much of her was honor enough, she said. But winning, was, well, really the cat's meow.

Hunter likened winning to receiving an Oscar. "You are singled out, known as the best, it still blows my mind," she said.

Nominees were judged on their work record and what they have done for the industry, Hunter explained. Her work record includes about 2,000 clients, 15 of which are her "bread and butter" regulars, people who work long hours and care about their pets getting attention they need to stay healthy, whether it's food, exercise, medicine, or a combination of things.

Some live in Fairmount and the Art Museum area. Like Sharon DeFelice from SRD Marketing/On-Line

Services, who wrote Kerri thanking her for ten years of service.

"The loving care you provide our pets when we are away is a great comfort to us," DeFelice wrote. "Your dependability and going that extra inch in providing service is non-plussed. Our little guys think so too."

Sometimes Hunter has to go an extra mile or two. Remember January's 30 inches of snow? When Philadelphia came to a standstill, Hunter did not.

"I had to walk to Fairmount," said Hunter, who lives in Fishtown, near Columbia and Girard Avenues, a few miles from Fairmount. "If I don't show up, a live being won't get feed, or in some cases, won't get medicine they need."

Sometimes Hunter's clients are home but physically unable to care for

their pets, like a woman who just had a hip replacement.

Then there are "vacationers" who gave Hunter the idea to go into business in the first place.

Hunter, a "secretary" by trade, was working for a vet who boarded animals. "I saw, firsthand, how some animals didn't like being in a cage," she said.

It got her to thinking: "There are babysitters for children and nurses who come in for the elderly. Why isn't there someone who can come into the house and make an animal's life easier?"

Hunter said animals suffer separation anxiety just like people and they need to relieve themselves every so often, too. Pet sitters offer pet owners an alternative to kennels.

"Animals can stay at

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Hunter is hunted

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You could say Kerri Hunter is "key" when it comes to pet sitting.

home where they will be less likely to get stressed out or susceptible to fleas and other diseases," Hunter said.

Hunter is licensed, bonded and insured. She recommends anyone considering a pet sitter look for all three things. The other things that make a good pet sitter, she said, are "reliability, dependability and commitment."

Hunter works like a dog in a business that can be ruff at times. "When you get into this business, it's 12-hour days, 7 days a week. You sacrifice your life."

But she wouldn't have it any other way.

"It's the love (of animals)," Hunter said, starting to cry. "I can't stand seeing hurt animals or abuse of any kind. I see a lot of neglectful situations and I have a chance to educate."

Hunter recommends people think before bringing a pet into their homes. "People don't realize the responsibility involved," she said. "They think it's going to be all cutesy. But it's like having a baby, incorporating a new family member into the home."

Unlike baby, who will eventually grow up, feed himself/herself, and leave home some day, Hunter warns that kitty or puppy will always be "baby" and need someone to care for them.

And when their owners can't do it, pet sitters like Hunter will be on the prowl, waiting to pounce on the chance to fill owners' shoes.

Helping hand

Continued from page 1

who added that she knew "the House" was where she wanted to be when she was ready to volunteer.

Bill Latona comes from South Philadelphia once a week to give haircuts but he also helps make signs. "I turn down a lot of overtime to come here," he said, but he doesn't care.

His wife, Joyce, got him involved. Her only regret is that she didn't "find this place sooner." Joyce said she comes twice a week, but then added that sometimes it's three, four or five times a week. She said she even thinks of calling on Saturday to see if they need help.

"I feel I get more out of it than I give," she said.

Max Cooper echoed her sentiments. He's been coming to the House since he took early retirement from his Conrail job two years ago. He even takes things home to do and has sort of "taken over" the house's gift shop.

Cooper admitted his favorite "job" was sitting at the reception desk. "I see myself as a concierge of sorts," he said. But he has done a little of everything, including washing windows and driving people where they had to go.

Volunteers come from all walks of life. Stacy Shapiro has her MBA and is a CPA but one night a week she is a "secretary" at the House, writing thank you notes

to people and working on various projects.

"It's been really great," she said of her experience which gives her "a nice, warm, fuzzy feeling."

Besides helping others, Shapiro also helps herself. She said she is single and volunteering at the house has been good for her socially. "I've met a lot of wonderful people," she said.

Whatever the reasons, volunteers agreed they get more than they give. And Hoffman will give anyone a chance to help out. There are any number of things that can be done and people are more than welcome to add their own special touches, like Bill and his haircuts.

Women, in particular, tend to forget about themselves, Hoffman said. A haircut or manicure makes them feel like a person again.

If you would like to volunteer, call 387-8406.

If you don't have time but would like to help, consider "Share a Night." The House is lit for Christmas; you can buy a light for \$10, which pays a family's cost for one night.