

Hunter is hunted by pet owners

by Debbie Szumowski

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 Fishtown resident started as "Kerri's Cat Care, pet and house-sitting," 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.

The self-described animal lover 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 cli-

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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.

Pet owners

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ents, 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.

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 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."

Remember January's 30 inches of snow? When Philadelphia came to a standstill, Hunter did not.

"I had to walk to Fairmount," she said. "If I don't show up, a live being won't get feed, or in some cases, won't get medicine they need."

When you get into this business, it's 12-hour days, 7 days a week. You sacrifice your life."

Although she works like a dog in a business that can be ruff at times, Hunter would have it no 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 mem-

ber 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.



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