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A canine connection

With Central Bark, these dogs have their days — and sometimes their weekends

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Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name - and your *woof*.

Tails wag at lightning speed, affectionately smacking the legs of fellow pups and humans alike, as Jackie Jordan, founder of Central Bark Doggy Day Care, says hello to the day's clients. They include dogs of every breed and bark.

Anyone who heard of her plan 10 years ago to leave corporate America to start her own dog day care thought Jordan was off the wall. Six states and 23 centers later, it doesn't seem so odd.

"We've humanized our pets, and we want to give them the best," Jordan said. "People are integrating their dogs into their lives so much more. They're our children."

In response to caring for an estimated 74 million dogs in the United States, day care for dogs is increasing. The American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, a trade association based in Greenwich, Conn., estimates that \$38.4 billion was spent on pets in the United States in 2006. Of that, an estimated \$2.7 billion was spent on pet services, such as grooming and boarding.

"There's definitely a trend of people opening up day cares," Jordan said. "It's competitive out there. But we've been doing this for a long time. We know how to do it right. This is what we do."

Chris Gaba, co-founder of Central Bark and a doggy day care professional in Florida, said Central Bark has a leg up on competitors. While there are dog sitters, dog walkers and other kenneling and boarding services out there, Central Bark offers a whole range of services.

"There's no one in our niche," Gaba said. "There is competition out there in that there are dog-walking services out there and other concepts. And the reality is, there is a need out there for home sitters and kennels."

"But there lies a significant difference between us and other businesses. Our clients are unique in that they understand this isn't just about them, it's about their dog. We offer them a home away from home."

Central Bark provides an array of services for dogs and their owners, including day care, sleepovers, grooming, training, vet services, parties and dog products. To ensure safety, all dogs must be up to date on vaccinations, spayed or neutered and undergo an initial behavior assessment.

Dog owners are required to adhere to at least a one day per week commitment, and those interested in sleepovers for their pets must be a client of regular dog day care. Hours and cost vary depending upon location. Central Bark Doggy Day Care has centers in Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Of the 23 centers, 16 are located in the Milwaukee area.

While some might see Central Bark's rules as rigid, the owners say the policies are for good reason. Other establishments might allow owners to bring in dogs whenever and how often they please, Jordan said, but such practices can be detrimental.

"It's not what's best for you, it's what's best for your dog," Jordan said. "Dogs are creatures of habit. It's important for them to have that mental and physical outlet. It makes them better dogs at home. They get used to their friends. We want them to know us and we want to know them. Some of them come so regularly they feel like they own the place."

"If left alone and unstimulated, dogs are going to do what people do," Gaba said. "They'll be sedentary, not living the life a dog really should live."

Jordan teamed up with Gaba in 2003 to optimize her day care business and grow. Together, the two developed the Central Bark Doggy Day Care concept and began Barkley Ventures Inc., making Central Bark more than just a doggy day care, but a franchising opportunity for dog-lovers.

It appears to be a career path on the rise. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of animal caretakers is expected to grow 22% between 2000 and 2010. Opening costs of a Central Bark franchise range from \$125,050 to \$218,380.

"We knew we could train others to do it right," Jordan said of the decision to form Barkley Ventures. "We spend too much time in our jobs to not enjoy them. We want our franchisees to have their personalities shine within the parameters of our business. I don't want it to be cookie-cutter."

"Nobody does day care like we do day care," Gaba said. "We're not about volume or getting the most dogs possible. We're about the dogs. With this huge trend toward the humanization of dogs, people are losing sight that they are still animals, and the reality is that many of these dogs were bred for specific duties.

"You take these duties away from a dog and they're bored. They don't know what to do. Doggy day care gives dogs a safe, clean, stimulating environment for dogs to do what they need to do."

A day in the life of a canine pal at Central Bark includes time spent in play groups, exercise, individual attention and naptime - where dogs are given their own crate, lights go out and soothing scents such as lavender are filtered in via aromatherapy.

Similar to child day care, dogs form loving relationships with their fellow pups, affectionately chewing on each other during play.

"They're crazy to come in," Jordan said of the dogs. "People can't get their car keys without their dog thinking, 'Ooh, we get to go to day care today.'"

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