

Dog day care is open nights, too

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"Megan Gourlie, 28, opened Dogtown, a 24-hour pet day care boarding facility for people who needed more flexibility. - The Enquirer/Cara Owsley www.dogtowncincinnati.com/

MT. AUBURN - Eric Gantwerker, a surgical resident, wanted a dog to keep him company at home after long days at the hospital. But like other workers with demanding careers, he felt his lifestyle wouldn't easily align with pet ownership.

That was until he discovered Dogtown, a pet day care and boarding business that's quickly delighting its customers. Not only is it open 24/7, allowing pets and owners to come and go as their crazy schedules allow, but it's cage-free and camera-friendly.

Pets can play with each other in open rooms and nap on individual beds. Dogs and cats are kept apart, and animal activity is constantly monitored. Owners can check in on their animals via computer or digital device, thanks to 15 cameras set up throughout the business.

"I honestly could not have a dog without Dogtown," says Gantwerker, who regularly works 12-hour-plus shifts at nearby University Hospital and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. Now he enjoys downtime with his 10-month-old border collie/lab mix, Mozart, who happily stays at Dogtown when he's not home.

Dogtown founder Megan Gourlie, 28, says she has found a loyal following among the pet-owning, health-care professionals who work close by. She didn't originally foresee that her location on Burnet Avenue, very near the Corryville health-care epicenter, would be an advantage.

But that is just one of the many reasons Dogtown, her first business, is thriving since it opened last May.

A designer by training, Gourlie got the idea for Dogtown because of her own struggles finding day care for her two energetic Weimaraners, Otto and Howie.

"I rescued Howie," she says. "He had major separation anxiety. Day care really helped, but I saw a need for day care that is more like home."

Gourlie found that there were no local day-care or boarding facilities open 24 hours where a person was always present with the animals, even overnight. She saw an opportunity and decided to leave her job with an architecture firm as a project manager to start Dogtown.

"I really designed the business to meet the needs that I had always wanted," she says. "There was a definite need in the industry for the kind of flexibility that this place offers. Before we opened, there was no place for someone who works 12 or more hours a day to take their pet."

Gourlie says she wants the pets to have the kind of experience they would have at home. Animals kept overnight sleep on dog beds in a room with one of Dogtown's 12 employees, usually Gourlie herself, and owners can check in on their pets through webcam video that is always on.

Day care costs \$21 for up to 12 hours. Boarding starts at \$39 for a 24-hour stay. Additional time is priced in six-hour increments: Six hours is \$10, 12 hours runs \$21 and 18 hours costs \$31 extra.

Gourlie's parents had been breeders of Scotties and Westies, so she grew up around dogs. She describes herself as "a natural" when it comes to handling dogs.

Gourlie worked with SCORE, the counseling organization of the U.S. Small Business Administration. The volunteer executives there helped her prioritize her preparations and find a building, that she says made all the difference in pulling the venture together.

She landed her location, ironically inside a former fur coat storage facility dating to the 1940s, after a thorough search that also involved a bit of luck. The owner of the building loved her business concept so much that he financed the renovations.

She has more than 400 customers so far, at least 50 to 60 of those regular day care clients.

Gourlie has made plenty of sacrifices to see her dream come true.

"I spend most of my time here," she says. "I really don't have much of a life right now except for this."

Gourlie's husband, Noah, lives in Chicago due to a job transfer. The relocation came at a good time, she says, since she has almost no time to see him due to the demands of her business.

"He is totally supportive," she says. "When he comes home on weekends he stays here at Dogtown with me."