



Heather Juracich's love of her 10 pets gave her the idea to start her own pet walking and sitting business

Photo Heather Juracich

Pet-related Businesses Spring Forth in Lamorinda

By Jennifer Wake

Most people like animals, but very few would go to the extreme of opening a business to cater to them. That number, however, is growing rapidly.

With a glut of cash flowing into the pet products industry, and new businesses popping up faster than Jack Russell Terriers, Lamorinda business owners who cater to critters find success comes from building relationships and being passionate about people's pets.

Like many pet-focused business owners, Len and Leslie Ofiana got into the business seven years ago because they loved animals. With three dogs of their own, (two of which were Greyhound rescues) and having worked retail during college, Len and Leslie decided to leave the corporate grind to open Nitro Dog in Lafayette – a unique boutique which caters to dogs and their owners.

Len likens the shop to running a neighborhood bar: "We know the names of the people who come in, we know their pets and their families," he said. "Our shop was once mentioned as one of the best pick up joints in Lamorinda," he added with a smile.

"We have wonderful customers who know us and know we'll do research on our products," Leslie said. "We're well priced and we'll tell our customers not to buy things if we've found they're not high quality or are not good for their pet. They trust us."

For the past seven years, Lafayette resident Amanda Harvey has been coming to Nitro Dog for her pet supplies. "They have a beautiful selection of stuff and the owners are awesome," she said. "They know my whole family."

In addition to featuring local artists' wares, such as hand-knitted chew toys, dog-shaped cutouts and animal paintings, the Ofianas support organizations like Paws for a Cause, Golden State Greyhound Adoption, and have the Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) mobile unit at their shop each month.

When Nitro Dog first opened, it was one of the only shops like it in the area, but Leslie says that is no longer the case. "Back then it was a niche, but now it's inundated," she said from behind the counter of her shop in La Fiesta Square. "Dog shops open (and close) every year."

There is a reason for the shift to this line of business: there is money to be made. According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, people spent more than \$40 billion on pets last year.

Lafayette resident and founder of Discovery Toys, Lane Nemeth, started PetLane in 2002 – a direct sales company that features pet products. Her products are now sold in 30 states through a network of 750 pet advisers.

And pet owners are paying for more than just products. One Walnut Creek-based company offers pet waste removal for East Bay residents. The Aussie Pet Mobile can be seen on Lamorinda streets providing mobile grooming for pets.

Heather Juracich of Lafayette was surprised she could actually make a living with her dog walking and pet sitting business. In 2002, when Heather worked for Lucasfilm Animation, she was having trouble finding a dog walker for her own dog. After doing some research, she left her job and founded Heather's Pet Care, Inc. After a year, Heather said that it got so busy her husband Josh Gum quit his job as a graphic designer to help out. "I walk the smaller dogs, and Josh takes the labs and the shepherds."

Now their 4-month-old daughter, Violet, has joined the family business, riding in the jogging stroller while Heather runs along with up to six dogs in tow at Lafayette Reservoir, Briones and other East Bay Regional Parks where they have a permit. Josh will take the larger dogs to Mulholland Ridge in Moraga, and the couple even takes dogs on 3-hour excursions to the water at Point Isabel or Paso Nogal. Inclement weather doesn't hold them back.

"If there's a light rain, we still go on walks," Heather said. "We just wear mud boots and rain coats."

In the past year Heather has seen a lot of new pet walking businesses starting up, but she says it doesn't matter.

"This is something I love," she said. "And the client comes home to a calm and tired dog who is happy."

The bottom line for animal-focused entrepreneurs is that they love what they do and can make a living doing it.