

• **Life in LAMORINDA**
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

• **Life in LAMORINDA** • **Life in LAMORINDA** •



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

Photo Heather Juracich

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 com-

pany 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.

Check Out Teen Open Studio at The Art Room in Lafayette

By Jean Follmer



Pictured left to right: Gi Gi Voris, Gemma Davies, Anya Rogala, Valerie Margerum, Shauna Brown, Gabby Lichtig, Emma Netland, Kay Vannelli

The Art Room has done business in Lafayette for ten years. Located on Lafayette Circle (across from Chow), it offers a variety of art instruction to ages 4 through adults. Classes are offered at the studio and enrichment classes are available at many local schools. A recent Friday afternoon found owner Gi Gi Voris teaching her Teen Open Studio class. The class ranged from 8th graders at Stanley to seniors at Acalanes and many have been going to The Art Room for years. Voris assigns at least one project for each of the 6-week sessions. Beyond that, students are encouraged to explore new mediums and

work on projects that interest them. The class is a "freeform, open class." Voris is there for guidance and assistance and her approach with the teens is relaxed. "They know where everything is," says Voris, and there are teenage supplies "that the little kids don't get to use."

The students openly expressed their feelings about Voris and The Art Room. "It's the best class in the world," said Acalanes Junior Gabby Lichtig. Emma Netland, also an Acalanes Junior, is the Arts Editor for the Acalanes Blueprint. An Art Room student since the 6th grade, Emma says, "It's a little art room family. I love it." Freshman

Photo Jean Vollmer

Gemma Davies agreed, saying, "I like that she (Voris) will give you advice about expressing yourself. It's a place where you can do your own stuff," while getting input as you need it.

Two students indicated an interest in art-related careers. While painting a panda, freshman Shauna Brown said she might go into fashion design. Senior Kay Vannelli is a finalist in the Bay Area Flowers Heritage Foundation high school art competition. She works on "paper cutouts" and one of them was entered in the AIDS awareness competition. Kay has attended The Art Room since 4th grade and likes it because, "It's a very relaxed at-

mosphere." She plans to go to art school for college.

Voris takes great pride in this class and in the rest of the offerings at her school. She runs The Art Room because she "loves art." It's far from a job to her, but her hobby and her passion. This is quickly evidenced by the first walk through the door. It's inviting, it's warm and it's uniquely Lamorinda. For more information, visit www.theartroom.com.

Support Lamorinda Weekly by shopping with our advertisers and telling them you saw their ad!
 Your local free Newspaper for Lamorinda

Eric A. Kessel, Ph.D.

Licensed Psychologist
 PSY 12069

(925) 254-7963

8 Orinda Way • Orinda • 16 years in Orinda

Season's Greetings Lamorinda

Have a wonderful holiday and
 Happy new year!



Thank you Lamorinda families and businesses for your support throughout the year. My family and I would like to wish you a very happy holiday season!



Wishing you all the best in 2008, Cheers!

Tim Floyd 925.348.4194
Custom Construction Loans-Purchases-Refinance

Lamorinda's Leading Independent Real Estate Firm



93 Moraga Road, Suite #103
 Orinda, CA 94563
 925•254•0505

To learn more about Village Associates or to preview our listings please visit:

www.villageassociates.com