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## **NEW JERSEY & COMPANY; It's Raining Sitters in the Pet Business**

**By DEBRA NUSSBAUM**

AFTER her fourth layoff in the Manhattan advertising business, Mary Dettloff decided about a year ago that it was time for a new career. She wanted to build her own clientele, to make her own hours, to have some job security and to be with creatures she loved.

Recently, Ms. Dettloff, of Hoboken, has been too busy to take a vacation. But she is happily supporting herself with Au Pairs for Pets, a service that provides care for dogs, cats, rabbits, birds and even the occasional turtle, when owners are out of town or too busy to do that midday dog walk or administer Fluffy's medications.

Ms. Dettloff joins a new breed of pet sitters who are increasing in number, predominantly women, and taking the profession as more than a part-time job or something they do for friends on the side. They say that today's very protective pet owners are happy to fork over \$15 to \$25 a visit to keep their animals well tended.

In the last four years, membership in the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters, which is based in Mount Laurel, has jumped to 1,500 from 850, according to Lorraine Zdeb of Somerville, who finished a two-year term as president of the association last year. Another group, Pet Sitters International, based in King, N.C., has 5,500 members, up from 3,000 in November 1999, said Ellen Price, a spokeswoman for the nine-year-old organization, which will have its annual convention this year in Philadelphia, in September. In both organizations, about 80 percent of the members are women.

Ms. Zdeb (pronounced zeb) has taken care of pets for 15 years. In September she plans to start showing others how to do so, opening the northeast branch of Pet's World Academy, a training center. For about \$1,500, potential pet watchers can take a five-day course in both the business and caretaking aspects of pet-sitting.

Though the state Department of Labor does not keep statistics on entrepreneurial ventures like pet-sitting, a cruise through Web sites shows that New Jersey is loaded with pet-sitting services: Diamond in the Ruff, in Pine Brook; the Critter Guardians, Old Bridge; Paws N' Tails, Fairview; the Catnip Gypsy, Verona; and Kitty Amour Inc., Aberdeen.

"People love their pets, so this is a good business," said Ms. Dettloff, who plans to hire some

part-time employees this year. "Even when money is tight, people have concern for their pets and will accommodate that. They just want their cats to have companionship. We tailor our visits to what the client's needs are."

Cynthia McCoy, who started Pet's World Academy in Loomis, Calif., calls this "the dog.com era."

"It's the opposite of the dot.com era," she said. "Pet sitters can create a quality of life and they won't be laid off."

Besides, there is a huge customer base, with an estimated 124 million pets in the United States, according to the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters.

"People today are more interested in the welfare of their animals," Ms. McCoy said. "People love their animals and want to take care of them the right way. The animals are their children. They treat them like children."

Pet sitters seem to share a passion for animals, and they often start in other careers before entering the pet-sitting business. Many have gained experience by working in pet stores, animal shelters or veterinary offices.

Michele Lowe of Aberdeen, for example, had worked in passenger service for several airlines and had volunteered at an animal shelter. She started pet-sitting part-time in 1996 and opened Kitty Amour as a full-time business a year ago. She watches cats only, mostly from Monmouth and Middlesex counties, and now has about 50 clients.

"Like my clients, I view cats as members of my family," Ms. Lowe said. She has worked 35-day stretches with no days off and has done visits from 5 a.m. until 10 p.m., she said.

She charges \$20 for a 45-minute cat visit. Like most serious sitters, she conducts an interview in the home before accepting any job. She and the cat need to "feel each other out," she said, to assure their compatibility.

Sitters also see themselves as agents of home security.

Ms. Zdeb said that on one of her first jobs, about 13 years ago, she was watching two terriers when her clients were vacationing in Mexico. Neighbors called to tell her that the security system was going off. As it turned out, a mouse had chewed through a wire. Ms. Zdeb stayed overnight at the home until the system was fixed.

But that wasn't considered a bad day. She said would save that description for the day a dog shredded the contents of a diaper pail all over someone's home and she had to clean it up.

Pet sitters often leave owners detailed notes of what Rover has been up to in their absence.

Thaler Pekar, a communications consultant who frequently hires Ms. Dettloff when she travels on business, says the sitter gives her extensive writings on what goes on in the life of her cat, Marzipan, while she is away.

"She leaves these full page letters of everything she's done with the cat," Ms. Pekar said. "They're poetry. She'll say how she was approached by the cat and that Marzipan purred quietly or loudly."

Ellen Johnson of Belle Mead has used Love Your Pet, Ms. Zdeb's company, for two years to take care of her three cats and says she doesn't worry when she has to be away.

"There's a real trust you have with her," she said. "For people with pets, they are our children."

A lot of pet sitters start businesses after trying the work out part-time and then forging ahead when the critter clientele grows.

Ms. McCoy started full-time three years ago after retiring from elementary school teaching. She charges \$15 to \$20 a visit and has watched everything from dogs and cats to cows, sheep and horses as well as birds, iguanas and rabbits. She defines her clients as "anything non-human." In 2001, she started Pet's World Academy because she wanted to elevate the profession and teach people animal care and business sense. There are no regulations or certifications for pet sitting, so this was a way to give people training and some professional status.

"It's disappointing that anyone can call themselves a pet sitter," she said. "We needed to have some standards."

The economy and record high unemployment seem to be fueling the pet-sitter market. Laurie Boreisha of Bloomfield started her business, Critter Care, about four years ago after being laid off by a computer company.

"My career was computers, but I always loved animals," she said.

She had been an animal keeper at the Turtle Back Zoo in West Orange and had managed a pet store. She was able to start her business through word of mouth, a small Web site and an ad in a coupon magazine. She specializes in exotic pets and has watched parrots, ferrets, rabbits, a rat and a skunk. After four years, she has more than 300 clients.

"I love the exposure to the animals," she said. "I can't get enough of them."

**Images:** Photos: Mary Dettloff, above, runs Au Pairs for Pets in Hoboken. Lorraine Zdeb, above left, is past president of the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters. (Photographs by Timothy Ivy for The New York Times)

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