

## Toronto Star, May 1998 Thinking Big

### Walking for Profit By Jennifer Bain



Every day hundreds, possibly thousands of Toronto dogs are bundled into minivans and driven to city parks to romp and socialize with each other. But it's not the busy working owners who are taking packs of pets out for fresh air and exercise, it's a growing legion of professional dog walkers.

"I've been doing this for 12 years and it has amazed me how much my business has grown", says Deena Cooper, 36. "I think it's a trend. People have kids, they want to get a dog but they have a very busy lifestyle and they can't do everything.

Cooper runs Deena's Dog Services from the cozy and immaculate house near Eglinton Ave. and Bathurst St. that she shares with her rottweiler, Billie. A large fenced backyard looks into Cedarvale park and there's a TV/sunroom for quiet times.

Toronto's business and media elite turn to Cooper for everything from lunch-time walks and private training lessons to doggie day care and "bed and breakfast." Canine clients of celebrity families include Forrest Budman (Roots), Besie Ashby(CHUM-FM), Pookie Mirivsh and the late Muffie Eaton.

Twelve years ago Cooper was dabbling with dog training/walking and working as a pastry chef.

"I couldn't do both so I decided to go to the dogs. It's just in my blood. I have it naturally in my voice and in my touch with animals.

"We don't take any scrappers-it just upsets the whole pack-and we only take neutered males because most unneutered male dogs tend to be a little more territorial and develop attitude," says Cooper. "Our dogs are not allowed to jump up on you and we won't take dogs that destroy your truck while they're in there".

Despite the rise in professional dog walkers, there are plenty of fly-by-night businesses which aren't reliable and don't understand dogs.

Being bonded assures customers that when they turn over their keys and alarm codes to dog walkers, they don't have a criminal record. Being insured protects the dog walkers against any damages the animals create.

Often customers must sign waivers saying the dog walkers aren't responsible if their pet is hurt or killed.

Another downside of the business is that dogs may bite them, run away and fight with each other.

Despite the surge in their cottage industry, dog walkers say there's plenty of work to go around as busy professionals realize they can hire a specialist for their beloved pets.

Theatre impresario David Mirvish and his wife, Audrey, discovered Cooper about 10 Years ago when they spotted her walking well behaved dogs and asked her to help out with their French bulldog, "Pookie".

David recalls that "In the early stages he was young and frisky and needed a lot of exercise. Now I think he likes the companionship of other dogs."

CHUM-FM morning man Roger Ashby and his wife, Moira, think of their Rhodesian ridgeback Besie as family and send her to Cooper to cut loose.

Explains Moira: "She's very protective of me and when we go to Sherwood Park she won't run with strange dogs, but she will run with them when she's with Deena. A dog needs other dog's to run with.