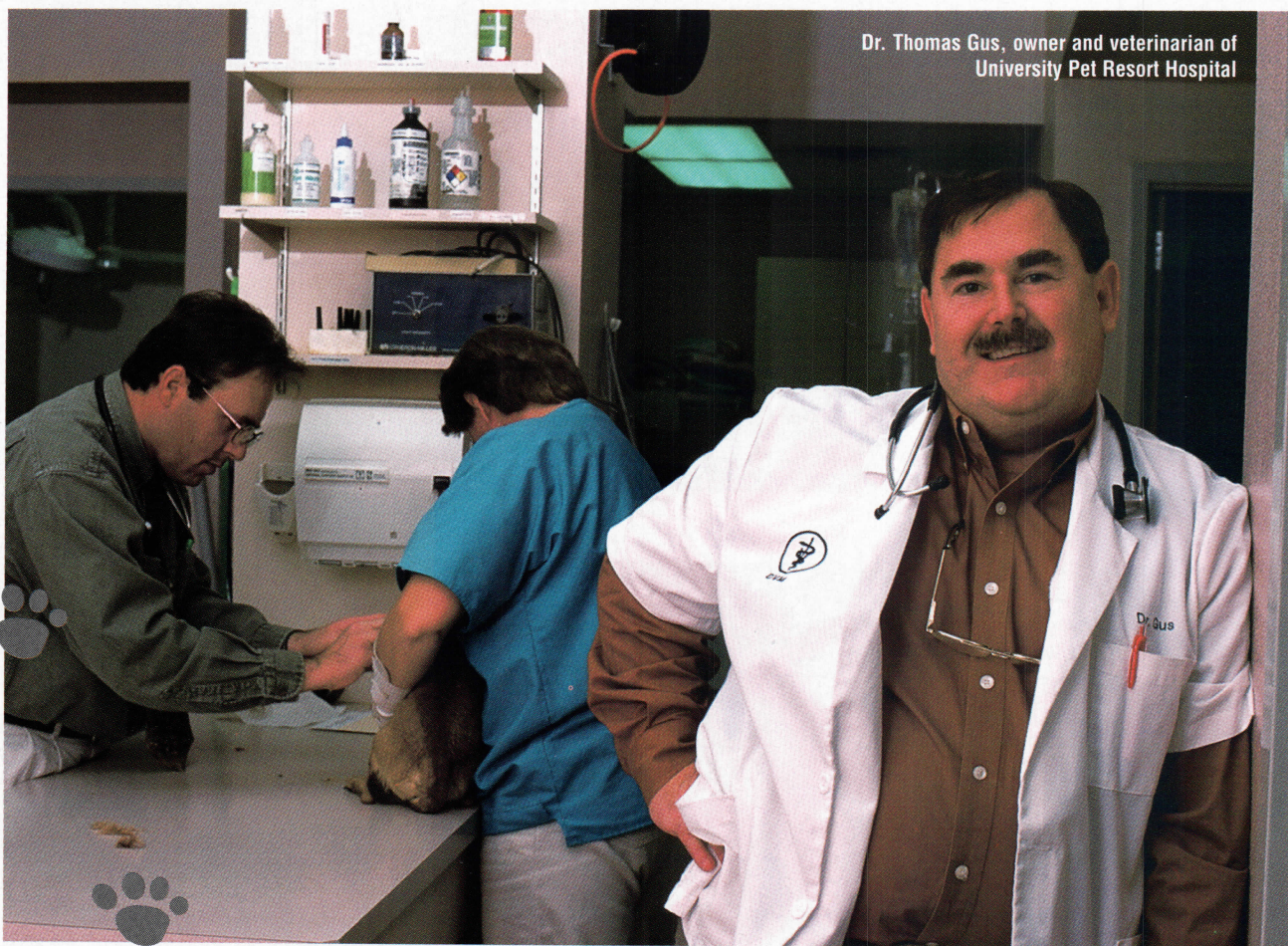


Pets n Parade

It's a dog's life for some Valley pets



by Cynthia Scanlon
photography by Chuck Brooks

There once was a time when a pet was simply a pet. Spoiled meant the dog got a few table scraps, and getting up on the couch was a real no-no. But now, all that has changed. Today's pets eat gourmet meals, sleep in silky beds, and are pampered as never before. Pets in the 1990s don't just go for a walk, they have play areas. And gone are the days of just lying around the house. Now our pets go on vacation and watch television.

"There's been a shift in a pet's position in a family in the last 10 years," says Homer Savard, owner of Raintree Pet Resort. "When I grew up in the Midwest, a dog was a dog and a cat was a way to keep the mice under control. But pets have been elevated to family membership in recent years."

This has never been more evident than today. And this has never been more visible than with the burgeoning pet care and boarding industry. Where once a family made arrangements to have a pet fed by a neighbor while they were away, today's animals go to pet resorts to play, be fed and cared for around the clock. If you haven't seen a modern pet resort of late, you are in for a surprise. Modern pet boarding and grooming facilities include dog runs, exercise pens, swimming pools and large play yards with a thick carpeting of grass. Many animals can have their own room. And let's not forget grooming services. Animals now have a veritable smorgasbord of pet hygiene to enhance even the most recalcitrant of doggy do's. "We groom 1,000 dogs a month right now," says Savard.

At Applewood Pet Resort, animals are exposed to many state-of-the-art amenities including pet activities, modern boarding facilities and pet play areas with grass. Pet owners can even schedule play sessions for their animals. "We have people sign up for as many as three sessions a day," says Marcia Zuger, kennel manager for Applewood. "We have people who want to just come in for day care. They are working and don't want to leave the dog alone, or it causes destruction while it is home. Just like day care for children, we have day care for dogs."

Applewood can accommodate 100 animals at a time and is currently building a swimming pool for its canine guests. Zuger says many owners schedule birthday parties for their dogs, complete with cakes, presents and doggy games.

And so as not to be left out, cats have their own quarters in these boarding facilities that would rival, well, most living rooms. "We have three-level cat condos that are individually ventilated," says Savard. "In the cat room, we have an 8-foot long, 300-gallon marine aquarium with saltwater fish for them to watch. Saltwater fish are brighter with more vivid colors. They think watching the

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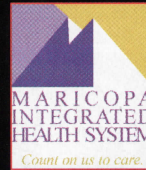
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Lest you smirk at all this seemingly silly extravagance, let us not forget: the pet business is big business. Serious big business. According to the American Animal Hospital Association in Denver, 81 percent of owners believe their pets are members of their families and should be accorded all the rights and privileges allowed such a position. The American Veterinary Medical Association reports that 58.2 million households, or 58.9 percent of all U.S. households, have pets.

These figures are borne out by the proliferation of pet superstores, virtual megalopolises of pet accouterments, sprouting up across the Valley and, indeed, the nation. The Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, based in Washington, D.C., says Americans forked over \$21 billion, yes billion, on pet food, supplies and services last year. The council also reports that premium foods and snacks now account for 25 percent of all pet food sales. That's a lot of kibble.

And, as might be expected, the health care industry has also gotten into the action. According to a study done by *Veterinary Economics magazine*, pet health care costs an average of \$173 a year and are rising 30 percent annually.

In trying to meet both the medical and services demands for pets, the University Pet Resort Hospital has taken the pet boarding business a step further and created an almost one-stop-shopping atmosphere for its clients and furry customers. Along with a hospital that services the medical needs of the animals, the resort also has a kennel for boarding dogs and cats, a grooming salon and a retail area for pet supplies. "We cover all the possible needs of pet ownership," says Dr. Thomas Gus, owner and veterinarian at the 14,000 square-foot University Pet Resort Hospital.

With the constant introduction of new medical technology in pet health care comes the responsibility of keeping up with all the new innovations, both for veterinarians and pet owners alike. It is not easy. "Information overload in veterinary medicine is the biggest challenge," says Dr. Robert Koch, a veterinarian at East Maryland Animal Hospital with more than 19 years of experience. "And trying to keep up with the cutting edge" is challenging as well. But he reports that many pet owners are now seeing it as their responsibility to know what kinds of medical procedures are out there and how to avail themselves of such services. "Most people are much more informed than they were even 10 years ago," says Koch. "People are doing well with self-education."

And that is no easy feat for today's pet owners. According to Gus, who has been a veterinarian for 20 years, pet health care has definitely moved into the new century. "We



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are doing things now that 10 years ago they were doing in human hospitals," he says. He cites ultrasound and needle-guided biopsies as two examples. "I just got a laser surgery unit in last week," he says. "These things weren't available a few years ago."

He adds, "With the medical technology and know-how available today, the average life span of a dog has doubled in the last 20 years. It's doubled because of the things we're able to do."

Along with all the medical breakthroughs, today's veterinarians and pet resort owners and operators also have to contend with the daily trials and tribulations that are part of the territory of running a small business. Everything from staffing to scheduling employees, balancing customer service with providing excellent pet care all enter into the equation.

"Our biggest challenge is attracting the staff that we need," says Savard. "There's a lot of competition for employees right now because the unemployment rate is low, and it's hard to find skilled employees who can deal with other people's pets." Savard adds, "It takes special people, and we work hard to find staff people who care about these pets like they were their own."

"My challenges are not unlike any other small businessman's challenges," says Gus. He ticks off the difficulty in finding employees, employees who don't show up for work once hired, and the seemingly constant paperwork and money demanded by the IRS. Supervising 60-plus employees and overseeing a facility that is open 20 hours a day, seven days a week can be taxing as well.

Marcia Zuger, kennel manager for Applewood Pet Resort and Riva, a happy Bernese client



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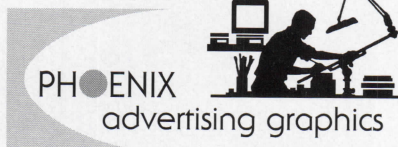
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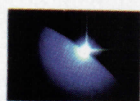
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According to Zuger, one of Applewood's biggest challenges is music to a business owner's ears: trying to accommodate all the clients who want the resort's services. The challenge is especially acute during peak holiday seasons when everyone seems to travel. "When the Olympics were in Atlanta, we filled up," says Zuger.

Despite some of the stresses, the pet boarding resort industry looks like it's going to stay. Companies involved with pet boarding are reporting increasing and steady sales year after year. "When the economy was bad in '90-'91, we were still growing at 12 to 15 percent," says Savard. Two years ago, he moved his business to new digs and reports steadily climbing receipts. "Our first year here we had a 40 percent increase in sales, and we are running a 14 percent increase this year," he says.

Savard, whose boarding business holds 125 units for dogs and 48 units for cats, attributes his success and the success of the pet boarding industry as a whole to people traveling more and to the transient nature of our society. "Because we have a more transient population, people just don't know their neighbors," he says. "I took care of neighbor's animals when I was a kid. No one took their pet to a kennel. But now they don't want to risk having their neighbor enter their home with the dog there. We take on that liability when their dogs come here."

Zuger echoes this sentiment. "Not everyone wants someone to come into their house and take care of their dog for a week or two," says Zuger. And, she points out, "With our temperatures here, you just can't just leave a dog outside with food and water. Some people don't have the option of letting them go in and out of the house, so the service is needed."

According to Savard, only 7 to 8 percent of the pet owning population, both locally and nationally, take advantage of pet boarding and care facilities. While he says that is a strong number, he would like to see those numbers climb. "Our challenge is to get it to 10 to 12 percent," he says.

In the future, says Savard, that may well happen because the industry has recognized the need their service answers and has taken steps to educate the population on what a pet boarding facility can provide.

"There's this perception that kennels are like the pound, and we've managed, over the past few years, to change the public perception of that," says Savard. "You can't go to the pound and see a kennel as clean as the one I have here. It's become a much more sophisticated business."



Cynthia Scanlon is a Tempe free-lance writer.