

Pooch pre-school already ready to grow

By Melissa Edmond
Staff Writer

The daycare center that Robin Blair spent five years trying to open is not your ordinary center.

Her goal of opening a business where people can bring their dogs while they're working instead of leaving them home alone, sounded like a simple enough concept to her but was a tougher sell to township officials.

She said she had to educate the officials who were not familiar with the idea of a day care for dogs — such businesses are more common on the West Coast, Florida, and Canada, she said.

But after three years of educating local officials and one rejection by the Zoning Board of Adjustment, she was able to open Dog Days Day Care on Roycefield Road business in August.

Before entering canine care, the 10-year Hillsborough resident worked in commercial real estate property management for over 18 years.

"Sept. 11 was when everyone started to question what they were doing and thinking about their mortality a lot more. I started to think about what I could do with my life," she said.

She loved dogs and wanted to be closer to home, so it seemed the right time to get started on her project.

"I think if I didn't think there was a need for this type of service in our community, I would have given up three or four years ago," she said, adding she was convinced there was a need for alternative to kennels in this community.

Ms. Blair said the key to her business is the fact dogs are social, pack animals and want to be with other dogs and humans. Because of this trait, dog daycare helps many pets be healthier and happier.

The daycare has five employees, providing one handler for every 10 dogs. "We never leave the dog alone. There's always someone here," she said.

Gail Kulur, a dog trainer at the center,

knows the importance of supervision. She and her husband were away on their honeymoon and their two golden retrievers were to be boarded for three weeks.

One of the dogs became sick with bloat, which causes dogs to suffocate from a build up of their gases, she said. Since the dogs were unattended overnight, no one knew that medical attention was needed, and her 6-year-old dog died.

"I was devastated ... I will no longer board my dogs anywhere that does not have someone available to oversee their health and welfare," she said. "Dog Days has 24/7 staffing and supervision, which puts my mind at ease."

Ms. Blair said Dog Days isn't competition for kennels because she can only accept dogs that are dog friendly, and spayed or neutered.

"We can only take dogs that would enjoy being here so if they're aggressive or have any other behavior problems that make them unsuitable to be here, they would have to go to a kennel," she said.

She said the center screens the dogs twice — once at their home and then once at the center to see how comfortable they are with strangers and other dogs.

Dogs can stay for a half day, up to six hours for \$20; a full day, up to 12 hours for \$35; overnight for \$25, or long-term. Dog Days can keep 25 dogs during the day and six overnight in the three bedrooms available. "We are cage free unless we're asked to provide a crate by the owners," she said.

The 2,800 sq. ft. building has a full grooming salon, cushioned rubber flooring, a large outside deck, fully fenced grass yard, fully fenced gravel yard, and separate areas for four different playgroups.

The center gives a discount to households that bring more than one dog. Its employees are available to pick up or drop dogs off at their house or veterinarian or grooming appointments.

She said it's a home environment. Dogs get to play with other dogs, socialize, lie on the couch, and roll around outside. By the time, the owner comes back for the dogs,

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**Robin Blair,
Dog Days Day Care owner**

they're happy just to sit at the owner's feet and watch television.

Ms. Blair said she hopes to finish construction of a second building at the center — she's calling it "a ruff house" — with a 4,000 square foot indoor playground, a 5,000 square foot of lawn and grassy area, an agility course, and rubber floors. This building will be for bigger, more energetic dogs that need more room and could hold up to 50 dogs during the day.

"I will be in heaven if I have that many dogs around," she said. "What could be more fun than playing with dogs all day?"

"I always had a life-long love for dogs. I didn't have the heart to work as a veterinarian and see them in distress," she added.

Ms. Blair said she has never been without a dog and currently has two dogs. She has been educating herself about the dog industry for four years. She is a certified pet care provider and technician by the American Boarding Kennel Association.

A love for dogs runs in her family. Her son Matthew, 29, a graduate of Nash Academy — which Ms. Blair called "a premiere school for dog grooming" — is a groomer at the center. He completed a 600-hour course and can groom every breed and does every kind of cut.

Also, Jim, her husband of 30 years, is in charge of maintenance and works with the dogs too, she said.

"I think we're unique. Nobody else has the indoor and outdoor area. I don't know anybody who's open 365 days a year and never leaves the dogs alone," she said.

"This is my dream. When you are fortunate enough to be able to work with your dream, it's not work at all," she added.