

Tails wag day care business. Couple embarks on city's first such site for canines.

By Ann Geracimos
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By most standards, the day care center on Virginia Avenue looks like any other. There are nap mats and videocassette recorders, plastic toys and little baskets for little belongings. What makes it different is the careful screening process to get in. The owners want to be sure that those who attend will lead a dog's life. The clients are, in fact, all dogs.

Dog-ma, Inc. is the District's only day care center for canines, though several have opened recently in the suburbs. Through the screening process, only good-natured dogs are accepted into the compound, a 7,000-square-foot fenced property near the Marine Barracks on M Street, SE. Former corporate executive Rebecca Bisgyer is the "ma" in dog-ma. Husband Nicholas Garnett is with her most days, as is a part-time trainer. Before entering the singular career, Ms. Bisgyer, 37, was the vice president and director of development programs for Ruesch International financial services, managing up to 100 people. "I felt unfulfilled," Ms. Bisgyer says of her former office job, explaining why she embarked on the uncertain future of doggie day care two months ago. "I was working longer and longer hours and making more and more money (only to find that) I had to work longer and longer hours to make more and more money. It's like (my husband and I) were on a gerbil wheel." She first met Mr. Garnett six years ago, when she was working at the Omni Georgetown hotel and he was with a marketing firm. "I was a client of hers," he says. Mr. Garnett himself made a sharp career turn last year by opting to become founder-owner of a small Norfolk company called Family Matters that provides food for low-income families. But the childless couple (their "substitute children" -- Sam and Morgan -- are two mutts rescued from a local pound) long shared the dream of one day creating a day care center for canines.

Ms. Bisgyer is convinced that her idea is going to catch on in a big way, but her real motive in putting her money where her heart lies is to provide loving

care and discipline to four-footed dependents. The couple spent their retirement money and savings on the project. "It's definitely different," she says. "It's wonderful. It's something I've dreamed of doing for a long, long, time . . . It combines a good business idea with something I love."

Finding a suitable site was the first task, followed by major cleanup, paint, and repair jobs. The yard was a tangle of weeds, and the existing building -- a plumbing-supply company -- little more than a shell. They ordered a fence and 6 tons of pea gravel for the yard and opened for business. Ms. Bisgyer made the career move after suffering considerable guilt over leaving her pets alone 12 to 14 hours a day while she worked. "Then it became a problem after work because I would drag them along everywhere," she says. "I felt I needed to be with them. And I knew there were people like me out there in droves." When she saw a TV news feature about a day care business for dogs in Philadelphia, the idea hit home: Why not do the same thing in the District?

The guilt is gone now, but the work hours are the same, only much more pleasant in spite of being confined inside the fence. "The bad times are when the dogs bark nonstop and it's raining." Chores are constant. In addition to cleanup duties, Ms. Bisgyer and her husband mop the floors nightly and spray the yard with a bleach solution. Present capacity allows for 25 active animals to roam freely much of the time. Gates and cages separate outrageously rambunctious charges when necessary.

"Dogs are most active when they first come in the morning and then again in the afternoon, when their owners come for them," Ms. Bisgyer says. "Like children, they won't stop playing unless they are made to." She supervises constantly and has most of the dogs napping in the afternoon. Some just drop off to sleep at her feet while she works at her desk. It must beat having to worry about a boss down the hall.