

Pet Services JOURNAL

January/February 2010

Staff Reviews

**What Does
It Mean...
Being Green?**

**Helping Local
Animal Shelters**

**MEMBER PROFILE:
Stay N Play
Pet Ranch Inc.
Dripping Springs,
Texas**

**PLUS:
Heart Disease & Pets
Dog Park Tips
Using the Leash Inside the Home**

Pet Care Services
ASSOCIATION

Stay N Play Pet Ranch, Inc.

DRIPPING SPRINGS, TEXAS

By John Ridge and Christy Stettler



Stay N Play Pet Ranch® is the result of Charlotte Biggs' vision of building an "all natural" and "green" facility for pet care. Biggs, who has a Bachelor of Science degree, spent eighteen successful years in sales and marketing as well as management for the pharmaceutical industry. She spent 80 percent of her time traveling while her four dogs virtually lived at different boarding facilities.

Often when Biggs picked up her dogs at these facilities, she'd say to herself, "I would love to do one of these (boarding facilities) my way." She imagined a facility that would provide the type of care she wanted for her pets, one that provided the level of attention she expected, one that would return the right pets to the right owners, clean and well fed.

Biggs' friend Betty Gale shared her desire to create such a facility. They

decided to leave their corporate jobs, pool their resources and build a pet care facility that would keep pets safe, healthy and happy in an all natural environment.

THE PROCESS

Biggs and Gale worked with a full list of consultants to assist them in the necessary steps to build their dream pet care facility. A CPA (Certified Public Accountant) helped put their business plan together. An attorney, after verifying there was no conflict, registered the

STAY N PLAY PET RANCH, INC.

VITAL STATISTICS

SERVICES

Dog Boarding, Cat Boarding, Pet Supplies/Products, Training, Grooming, Day Boarding, Canine Massage and limited Canine Rehab Services

NUMBER OF ENCLOSURES

Sixty indoor-outdoor dog, twelve cat

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES

Fifteen full-time, seven part-time

RESERVATIONS/CANCELLATIONS

Reservations for boarding, grooming and training are required in advance. Boarding reservations require 24-hour notice for cancellation. Holidays require a 14-day cancellation notice, deposits become non-refundable if this is not adhered to.

ENTRANCE AND IMMUNIZATION POLICY

Documented vaccinations or titer test results are required, including canine cough. The only exceptions are allowed with a letter from a veterinarian stating that vaccination is not in the pet's best interest due to age or illness.

FEEDING

Feeding occurs twice a day. This provides two opportunities a day to assess the pet's eating habits, as well as reduce the volume of food consumed by any potential bloated dog.

CLEANING SUPPLIES

L.O.C. (Liquid Organic Cleaner) for most surfaces, including equipment, Kuranda beds, crates, etc. Natural laundry soap, SAB, biodegradable, with no phosphates. Chlor-Aid, Kennel-Plus for disinfecting dog runs, play yards, and equipment. FleaBusters for flea and tick prevention, and Nature's Specialty natural shampoos and conditioners.

RETAIL ITEMS

All natural pet foods and treats, natural pet shampoos and conditioners. Collars and leashes, training support items. Limited dog beds and toys, cat treats and toys. ShockTag natural pest control products and biodegradable poop bags.

STAFF TRAINING

Stay N Play participates in educational opportunities that arise through associations and local events. Staff is trained in the Pet Care Technician Level I program, and with the opportunity to move on to Level II. Pet Care technicians go through an on-the-job training program with a 30-day and 90-day review process. Trainers and groomers are members of their respective associations.

IF THEY KNEW THEN WHAT THEY KNOW NOW

Biggs - There would be different sizes of dog runs to accommodate different sizes of dogs and groups of family dogs, rather than having all runs be the same size. Gale - Grooming turned out to be a secondary source of business; make sure you have the proper spaces available to accommodate the washing as well as the grooming.

WEBSITE

www.staynplaypetranch.com

name Stay N Play Pet Ranch and set up a business entity for them. An intellectual property attorney walked them through the Federally Registered Trademark process for their name and logo. The Small Business Development Center and the Small Business Administration assisted with the loan approval from an appropriate lender.

Once the decision was made to build a pet care facility, Biggs and Gale joined Pet Care Services Association in 1996 to learn all they could about the industry, the facilities needed, and the operational activities involved in such a venture. "The members of PCSA were so willing to share information that it certainly made it a lot easier for us," says Biggs. "The local meetings, the convention and most importantly networking with others in the industry provided a wealth of information at just the right time."



Charlotte Biggs and Betty Gale are the proud founders and owners of their "all natural" and "green" pet care facility.



Dogs play in exercise yards filled with cedar mulch.

BUILDING GREEN ON A LEAN BUDGET

With the help of Pet Care Services, Biggs and Gale found architect Todd Schrimpsner, a member of the American Institute of Architects, who was experienced in designing pet care facilities. Schrimpsner researched and designed their facility based on their desire to have it as green as possible. He also identified the builder and orchestrated all aspects of the physical construction of the facility.

At that time, the green building movement was still on the fringe of the construction industry. Materials and processes were harder to find and more expensive than they are today. While Biggs and Gale had a long wish list of building characteristics, their budget required careful selection of which to include in the final design. Through the process of value engineering with the architect, they simplified the construction plan to make the facility financially feasible without resulting in an inferior product. They focused on keeping the features that were best addressed in the initial stages while holding off on others that would be better to add in the future.

In November 1998, construction was completed and Stay N Play Pet Ranch opened its doors for business. The building was designed and built as "natural" and "green" as the budget would allow. Attention to wind patterns supplied the orientation of the building to maximize fresh air flow and reduce the need to use air conditioning. A rain water collection system and an aerobic septic system were built. Plenty of windows were used to allow as much natural light as possible into the building. High tech gutters were placed in the trench drains to ensure the smooth and total elimination of liquids down and out of the boarding buildings. These features made the Stay N Play Pet Ranch building as environmentally friendly as possible.

THE FACILITY

Today, the 6,800 square foot stone and cement board-ranch style building sits on nine beautiful hill country acres in Dripping Springs, a semi-rural community outside of Austin, Texas. Proximity to a fault line required that the building footers be placed deeper than normal in the ground

and the walls cross-strapped to meet earthquake standards.

Nearly 1,600 square feet of roof surface area allows for the capture of rainfall that flows through six-inch downspouts to an underground piping system. The water then flows into three collection tanks placed behind the main building, each with a 10,000 gallon capacity. A pump house sits next to these tanks where the water is filtered through an ultra-violet light, a charcoal filter, and a fiber filter to produce some of the best tasting water possible. A bottled water company sales representative once visited the facility on a sales call and after making a comparison, found that he couldn't beat the water quality at the facility.

The main building contains a reception and retail area, two boarding buildings, a cattery, grooming salon, training office, a massage room and the operational areas of kitchen, bath, laundry room and mop room. Classical music is played throughout the building to reduce stress and provide a calming influence. The second floor is an eight-hundred square foot apartment which houses the night manager.

Outside the building are eight exercise yards ranging in size from 200 to 400 square feet. Cedar mulch fills the play yards which serves as a natural insect repellent while providing a more natural surface for the dogs to play on. A 5,000 square foot training yard with lights is also available for training classes and activities.

Several miles of walking trails are available for the "Nature Walkers" (a very popular position among Stay N Play's employees) to take the dogs. From a leisurely stroll through flat shady woods to



Rainwater collection tanks.



The roof-over-roof design helps keep fresh air flowing through the boarding areas.

challenging routes through the hills, dogs of all ages and energy levels can be exercised.

Because of the mild Texas climate, the boarding areas contain inside/outside runs for the dogs. The building design features a roof-over-roof concept which not only promotes fresh air being pulled through the buildings but provides cover for the outside portion of the runs.

The cattery is in a room separate from the dogs, with two-room condos that can open up to allow cats from the same household to share the same space. Instead of a play yard, picture windows allow extra sunlight into the cattery. It also has televisions for the cats to watch.

THE BUSINESS

Biggs and Gale own and operate Stay N Play Pet Ranch, making all of the upper management decisions, while the day-to-day business is managed by Business and Operations Manager, Melody Hilburn, and Director of Kennel Operations Lynn Fruchey, DVM.

Gale oversees much of the maintenance and physical facility needs, while Biggs oversees the daily operational and business aspects. Hilburn manages the front office, grooming, retail sales, as well as general business and marketing. Fruchey handles human resources, daily lodging operations, the Nature Walkers, the trainers and the massage therapist.

Stay N Play Pet Ranch's website is their key instrument for reaching the pet-owning public, with 90 percent of their advertising being internet based. Biggs and Gale are learning about social media outlets and recently established themselves on Facebook, Twitter, and Yelp. Their other marketing efforts include direct marketing to veterinarians in the community, along with advertising in and writing a column for a local monthly magazine.

When Stay N Play Pet Ranch first opened, employee turnover was a problem. Over time, Biggs and Gale have gained experience in interviewing and identifying personalities that best fit their business. Once they find a good employee, they do what they can to keep them by providing positive feedback, training, and pay based on performance rather than tenure length. They also recognize performance achievements at special luncheons and offer employee discounts on products and services. Because of these practices, employee turnover is no longer a problem. Now, if an employee leaves, they do so because of personal life changes rather than workplace factors.

THE PETS AND THE PEOPLE

Stay N Play Pet Ranch's policy is to provide undivided attention to the person in front of them at the moment, without rushing through the interaction. To ensure customers receive first-rate service, sufficient staff is scheduled in the front office to handle the projected transactions for each day such as answering phones and serving retail clients.

New clients are given a tour of the facility. They are shown the runs, the back rooms, literally every inch of the facility—so they can see what kind of environment their pet will be spending time in. "You see everything at Stay N Play," Gale says. "If you go to a place, and they don't show you where your dog is going to be staying, that should be a red flag."

All food provided to the animals are human-grade containing no added chemicals, byproducts, or preservatives. Should it be the choice of the owner, food from home is allowed. Staff is also equipped to safely handle raw food for the many pets boarded at Stay N Play Pet Ranch that are on a raw food diet.

Due to the large customer base of geriatric, diabetic, epileptic, and surgery recovering animals, community play is not offered. However, thanks to a high pet care technician to pet ratio, each pet receives individual attention to their needs, even when they are perfectly healthy.

RUNNING A "GREEN" OPERATION

Biggs and Gale are celebrating their eleventh year of service and have remained true to their all natural and "green" philosophy regarding the operation of their facility. They minimize as much as possible the use of chemicals. Instead, they use organic cleaning agents, natural shampoos and conditioners, non-phosphate and biodegradable laundry soaps, and feed natural human-grade dog and cat foods. Two front-loading washing machines are used for laundry, which require less water than top-loading machines.

Natural and non-chemical pest control products are applied to the pets to prevent fleas and ticks. Ionizers are used throughout the facility to minimize the risk of airborne spread disease.

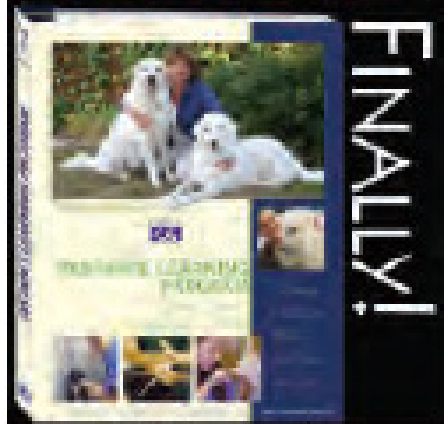
Biodegradable bags are used throughout the facility and by our "nature walkers".



The Front Office Administrator takes "mom's" instructions for her pappion over the phone.

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Stay N Play gives back to their community by supporting the local animal shelter.

Sterilized recycled paper pellet litter is used in the cattery and for small animal bedding. All natural pet foods and supplies are offered in their retail section.

GIVING BACK

The gift of sharing by the members of Pet Care Services Association inspired Biggs to give back to the Association. For the last nine years, she served on the Board of Directors, first as the Director of Region 8, then as the Vice Chief Governance Officer for the years 2008 and 2009.

Of the things she's accomplished, Biggs considers the establishment of Board Policy Governance a major step in the growth of Pet Care Services Association. This created a structure for the association to better meet the needs of the pet care industry as it rapidly expands and evolves.

Biggs is also proud of the way the Board responded to the situation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Through Pet Care Services Association's relationship with the American Kennel Club's affiliate AKC Companion Animal Recovery (AKC CAR), an emergency relief fund was established where members could donate money. The donations assisted in the recovery of displaced animals and their transport to Pet Care Services Association member facilities, where they were boarded until their owners were found or until they could be adopted.

Stay N Play Pet Ranch is also involved in the local community. Bi-annual fundraisers are held at the facility for the

PAWS Shelter and Humane Society of Hays County. In addition, Stay N Play provides training for dogs from PAWS so they become more eligible for adoption. Over the years, they have helped ten dogs find a home through their involvement.

Stay N Play also donates training and boarding packages to local high school and church fundraising events.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

After nearly twelve years in business, Biggs and Gale continue to plan for expansion and improvement of Stay N Play Pet Ranch. In January, they will repaint the walls with a natural paint, something they wished they could have done when the facility was first built.

Also in the planning process are the additions of a covered training pavilion and rehabilitation center, which would create an extra 2,000 square feet for the facility. In addition, they plan to add suites to their facility, rooms that will be almost like a hotel. Their plans are subject to the ups and downs of the



"Hudson" checks out Stay N Play's selection of all natural pet foods and supplies offered in their retail section.

economy, just like many other businesses. Biggs and Gale have found that with the way that markets change, it helps to conduct research instead of responding to knee-jerk reactions. "You can have all the best laid plans in the world," Gale says, "but if the market and the economy don't allow for it, they won't do you any good."

AT THE END OF THE DAY

Making a difference in the life of pets and their owners is what Biggs and Gale enjoy the most about running a pet care facility. Their staff strives to provide the best possible experience for owners needing a place for their pets to stay, be groomed, or be trained.

Gale notes that the pet care business can be stressful at times. Unless reliable staff can be found, most of the work has to be done by the owner, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. "Every now and again," she says, "you have to take a step back and take a good look around to help stay alert to what needs to be done. Non-stop immersion in minutiae can stymie creativity and cause burnout."

Biggs has learned to handle stress and long hours by spending time with the pets staying at the facility. "They always brighten my day and my mood if I'm in an overwhelming situation," says Biggs fondly. "I'm getting as much as I'm giving and it clears my head."

Biggs remains focused on why she started her business, and encourages others to do the same. "Never forget that we're working with living, breathing, loving creatures and it is all about them when it comes to their needs and their owners'—our clients—needs, recommends Biggs. "With this at the front of our minds, we can make more successful business decisions." 🐾

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