All in the Family

A LOCAL START-UP BUSINESS ADDRESSES A LONG-NEGLECTED PROBLEM AMONG HARRIED CITY PET OWNERS

By Susan Lunny Keag

From left: Nicole Romagnolo and Loni Rudolph, with two of their furry charges

Work. Drycleaner. Gym. Home. Dinner. Store. These are just a few of stops we make in our daily routine, especially during the busy holiday season. But in the midst of our hectic schedules, we sometimes forget to stop and think about the precious four-legged loved ones who are anxiously awaiting our return.

"What dogs are doing all day is waiting for you to get home. They stand at the door and when you come in; they're *super* excited to see you," said Nicole Romagnolo, co-owner of Whiskers and Leo Pet Care, an in-home pet sitting service whose "clients" include all domestic pets, such as cats, birds, fish, guinea pigs, and reptiles.

Unfortunately, Romagnolo notes, most people will come home for a few minutes after work and then head out for the next part of their busy day. This can lead to pet problems like destructive behavior, accidents in the house, or too much pent up energy when their owner returns.

These are just a few of the reasons Romagnolo, along with her friend Loni Rudolph started Whiskers and Leo, formerly Fetch! Pet Care of Staten Island. Before starting their own pet care business, Rudolph worked as a lawyer and Romagnolo worked in the retail industry—careers that demanded long days and afforded time at home. The women knew that many people were in their shoes, looking for someone to look in on their pet and offer companionship when they couldn't be there. The women—pet lovers themselves—knew first-hand that pets crave companionship while their owners are away during the day.

Whiskers and Leo
Call Nicole or Loni at 347.223.5116, or visit www.whiskersandleopetcare.com

Dog walking is one of their most requested services, and many of their clients call about getting help from Monday through Friday, the busiest days with work and extracurricular activities. The business also provides sitters who will watch your pets for a just a few hours, overnight, or even while you are on an extended vacation. Prices for services vary, and are established after an interview in which details about a pet's health, routine, temperament, and past history are discussed. All new clients are offered a free in-home consultation.

"We wanted pet owners to be aware that there is another option out there now," said Rudolph. "You don't have to rely on your neighbors, friends, or family anymore or take your pet to a facility. It's a *real* responsibility caring for an animal."

Whiskers and Leo's pet sitters do more than just stop in just to let the pet out or feed them. They also keep them on a regular routine.

"We keep them on the same feeding schedule and walking schedule," said Romagnolo. "Routine is very important (for pets), so we keep the same schedule they would have at home, even if they're at the sitter's house."

The women are also happy to provide an alternative to kennel boarding and facility care when people have to go away.

"We hate to see pets alone and/or in cages; however, Staten Island just didn't have any other options," Rudolph explained, noting that their sitters can stay at the pet's home or bring them to their own, depending on the client's needs.

Other services Whiskers and Leo offer include doggie day care, hotel pet sitting, pet transportation, pet baths, and yard waste cleanup.

Clients will also be happy to know that sitters (whom they always meet beforehand) go through a rigorous screening process before being hired. In addition to criminal background checks, all 25 sitters are bonded and insured—a factor that was critical to the owners, who regard clients and their pets as family.

"We have very special relationships with our clients because they trust us with a part of their family," Romagnolo said. And the sitters, in turn, become a part of the pet's family.

"The dog has a new friend," said Romagnolo. "They really look forward to us coming." ●