

## SHOW ME THE MONEY

BY CARRIE ALLAN



# Taking the Lead

## Local business helps shelter dogs walk around the clock

Whether they're living in a loving home, a caring animal shelter, or on a distant planet where kibble rains from the sky and squirrels are slow-moving, docile creatures, all dogs are bound by at least one universal truth: When they've been cooped up all night, they want just one thing when morning rolls around: Walkies!

(Try saying that word out loud in the kennels sometime; the force of the collective wagging could power your washing machines for a week.)

Unfortunately, the staff working the early shift at an animal shelter usually have to deal with another universal morning reality of dogs—the kind of reality you can accidentally step in.

"We needed to get all of our dogs out first thing in the morning," says Jim Monsma, director of communications at the Washington Animal Rescue League in the District of Columbia. "All the staff are busy with cleaning tasks, and besides, you can't get volunteers in at eight in the morning. At least, not many. Not enough to walk 120 dogs."

The shelter got in touch with a local dog-walking company, Dogcentric, and asked if they could send staff to walk the shelter dogs each morning. "It worked out for them, because they have employees sitting around without much to do at that time, because they don't really get busy until midday at lunch ... but they were paying them for eight hour shifts," says Monsma.

The company agreed, and since September of 2006, it has been sending two employees to the shelter each weekday morning; the dog walkers take the excited pooches out for their morning romp, while the staff deals with kennel cleaning. In return, the shelter promotes the com-



JOSHUA FRIEDMAN/DOGCENTRIC

The relationship between the Washington Animal Rescue League and Cheryl Staab's company, Dogcentric, brings financial benefits for both groups—and exercise for the shelter's dogs.

pany on its website and adoption papers. "That's all it costs us—it's a real symbiotic relationship," says Monsma.

While the dog walkers technically only have to show up during the work week, Monsma says that many of them tend to bond with their canine jogging partners. "It's part of their routine; they look forward to seeing the dogs, so ... on Thanksgiving or other holidays, they'll come out and do their shift just for the fun of it."

Cheryl Staab, owner of Dogcentric, says the program is enormously rewarding for her staff and for her company. Since the shelter often refers adopters to Dogcentric, walkers often continue to see "their" dogs after they've gone home. "That's even cooler—you see the dogs regain their trust while they're at the shelter ... and then you get to see them in their new homes, and be their walkers there too," says Staab.

The program makes the shelter happy, the company happy, and the dogs ecstatic—the kind of ecstasy only the sight of a leash can elicit. And it's saved the organization a lot of money and staff time. "We'd have to hire another staff person to do this; I don't think it could be run by volunteers," Monsma says.

Do the math: The League pays its kennel staff \$11 an hour. Dogcentric's walkers now provide the shelter's pooches with four hours of exercise a day, five days a week, 52 weeks a year. If the organization was to have its own staff replicate the walking program, it would cost the shelter slightly over \$11,000 dollars a year.

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