

MEET THE PET PROS

How do you stop a barking borzoi? Groom a tangled tabby? Or console a lonesome corgi? We asked some local folks whose lives revolve around taking care of animals for some of the tips of their trade.

BY MARISA IALLONARDO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS WARE

THE VETERINARIAN

Dr. John Pisciotta of Croton-on-Hudson, a graduate of Purdue Veterinary School, has been working at the Rye/Harrison Veterinary Hospital for the past 15 years.

Were you an animal lover as a child?

Of course. I would be surprised to find a vet who wasn't.

Do you recommend getting pet health insurance?

Yes, if you have a purebred dog, or an animal who you know is going to have problems. It's usually not worthwhile if you adopt an animal who tends to have few problems. While it's still being fine-tuned, over the next few years pet health insurance is going to be recommended to everyone.

What is the most difficult medical case you've handled?

The most mysterious?

There was a diabetic cat named Barney and, though we tried everything, we couldn't get the cat regulated and stabilized. The owner ended up putting Barney to sleep. And as for one of the most mysterious cases, it was that of a dog who was losing weight. We did a GI series, saw something in his stomach, and went in surgically. It turned out the dog had most of a Nerf football in his stomach. After it was removed, he was totally fine.

What's the most important health advice you have for pet owners?

Practice preventative medicine. Make sure your pet is on a good plan of nutrition. Keep your dogs on a leash, and check your pets for ticks and fleas.

What's the most a pet owner has spent on a pet you've treated?

One woman spent between \$15,000 and \$20,000 on her dog in a year. It was geriatric and had lots of problems. The dog eventually died, but we were able to extend its life for that year.





THE GROOMER

Barbara Mackay, opened Happy Tails Grooming Salon in Irvington last year with her sister, Donna. She has been grooming pets for the past 10 years.

Why is it important that pets be groomed?

Grooming keeps skin healthy and keeps shedding more in control. It's good for detecting fleas and ticks, and noticing cancers or other medical-related problems. We once groomed an 18-year-old cat, whose owner said was paralyzed. It took three days to get the cat fully groomed, and it turned out there were pins in her fur that she had gotten from rolling around in the sewing room. Once the pins were removed, the cat was no longer paralyzed.

How often should animals see a groomer?

Every four to six weeks, especially dogs and longhaired cats.

What are some basic things owners can do at home to keep their pets well groomed?

Brush; animals should be brushed on a daily basis, even if they're not animals who shed very much. Also, touch their feet and ears a lot, and put your hand in their mouth. This way, when the time comes for them to go to a groomer, they'll be used to it and not get nervous or scared.

What is the hardest or most challenging animal to groom, and why?

Badly matted animals are the hardest to groom. Their skin is just so sensitive, and it can tear easily. It's hard on the animal as well. In terms of size, Newfoundlands are challenging because they're just so big. You try and blow-dry their bellies, and they wind up sitting on your shoulders!

What is your favorite, and least favorite, part of the job?

The best part of the job is definitely the animals. You have to love the animals to be able to come in and work with them every day. My least favorite part is probably the cleaning. We have to sanitize everything, every day, which can be tedious.

THE PET SITTER

Sheri Gray, owner of Fur-Ever Friends Pet Services in Purdys, has been in business for three years.

What made you decide on pet sitting as a career?

I knew I couldn't go away leaving my pets unattended. I thought, there must be other pet owners who feel the same, so I decided to start advertising for people who needed pet sitters, and the response was immediate.

Have you ever met a rich pet sitter?

Depending on how many clients a pet sitter has, there is definitely money to be made.

What important precautions should pet owners take before hiring a sitter?

Make sure that the sitter is insured and bonded. Also, make sure that the sitter is willing to meet with you, and that he or she arrives promptly.

How do you as a sitter prepare for watching a pet that isn't your own?

A meeting with the client is the best thing. We have a contract that the pet owner must sign, in which we record how and when the animal needs to be fed, what, if any, medicines it should take, what to do in inclement weather, etc. Also, I want to meet the animal first. With a pet that's more aggressive, a couple of visits may be required, so that both owner and animal are comfortable.

What is the most unusual pet you've sat for?

A potbellied pig. It lived outside in a pigpen, and we went and threw it slop and other things. He was like Wilbur from *Charlotte's Web*. We've also sat for birds, rabbits, snakes, horses, turtles, and chickens.

How can you tell if a dog misses his owner?

There are very obvious signs. The dog gets depressed. He has diarrhea. He doesn't eat. These are the three big signs. Other signs are if the dog gets aggressive, is spiteful, or is mopey when it usually isn't.

What can you tell about an owner from caring for his or her pet?

A lot. You can learn how the owner treats the animal, and, from that, you can often assume how they treat people.





THE DOG TRAINER

Dog Trainer Kevin Frohm, owner of the Dog Woods Camp in Mahopac, has been working with dogs for the past 15 years. He started out as a dog walker and used to train dogs for Frisbee and dog competitions. He also bred Labradors until he opened his own facility nine years ago.

What breed of dog is most difficult to train?

The older Asian breeds are the most difficult. They are working dogs, very instinctive by nature—and not necessarily family dogs. Dogs who have to be rehabilitated or street strays can also be a challenge.

What makes someone a good trainer?

Consistency; that's the most important thing. You have to be able to communicate to your dog what you want and not change your mind or be wishy-washy. Dogs like not having big changes in their environment; it makes them feel secure.

How do you handle a dog who insists on stealing your socks?

Socks are very interesting to dogs. Dogs' sense of smell is very intense, and socks usually smell like their owner. Keep your socks away and off the floor, since teaching your dog not to steal is much easier if

he can't see the item. Then, slowly re-introduce the socks and let him know that stealing is not an acceptable behavior. Depending on the dog, this can mean verbal negatives, collar shakes, or a shaker can.

How about a dog who loves the sound of his own barking?

It all depends on why the dog is barking. Is it a learned behavior? Does the dog want attention? Is there something outside the window? If you take away what's causing the barking and refocus the dog's energy elsewhere, the dog shouldn't bark as much.

What is the most someone you know ever paid to train a dog—and failed?

Some dog training classes may cost \$150. Private training costs between \$600 and \$1,000; sometimes more. And there have been dogs who have gone through these classes and have not changed. But often it's not the dog's fault, often because the owner's behavior did not change. Even the best dog, if allowed to behave in a certain way, will. You have to train the owners too.

Can you teach an old dog new tricks?

Absolutely. You just have to change the environment. Dogs are very adaptable. If they've lasted to a certain age already, they must be.

THE VOLUNTEER

Mimi Stone of Mamaroneck is president of the Central Westchester Humane Society and has been volunteering at the Elmsford Animal Shelter for more than 20 years. [Stone did not want to be photographed because, she says, "it's about the animals, it's not about me."]

Why do you volunteer?

I love animals, and I feel they're not getting a good break in this world, so I want to put in the effort to make it as easy for them as possible.

What's the case that made you cry most?

I found out a long time ago that crying doesn't help. Doing is much better. We sometimes get very abused animals, and it might be something to cry about, but we would rather work to find them a good home.

What has been your best or most fulfilling experience?

We've had animals come in in very bad shape. We've seen them literally starved, with horrific skin problems, or left outside. But, after we get them fixed up, people come in and say, "Wow, what a beautiful animal." That's the best feeling.

Why should future pet owners consider adopting pets from a shelter?

By adopting from a shelter, you are giving an animal that is absolutely needy a home. Plus, animals from shelters are usually trained because they've lived in homes.

How many strays come into the shelter each day, and what is the success rate in finding them homes?

The average is three a day. Eventually we find all the animals a home. We are one of the very few no-kill shelters, and, with us, it's a total success rate.

Are stray animals a big problem in Westchester?

It is a problem everywhere. 