

Creature comforts: MetroWest companies offer a variety of special services for pets

By Kathy Uek / Daily News Staff

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Suffering from arthritis at an early age and walking with a limp, Basel stepped into the underwater treadmill for 15 minutes of physical therapy.

Red digital numbers indicated Basel's speed of 1.4 miles per hour as he tread in the 88-degree water to build and stretch his muscles. For the last part of Basel's one-hour appointment, while soft, soothing music played, a Natick doctor applied 10 acupuncture needles to the patient's back and legs. The acupuncture improves Basel's circulation and reduces his pain. Basel's brother, Cody, waited nearby.

The doctor, veterinarian Suzanne Starr, recently administered the weekly physical therapy to Basel, a 1-year-old Bernese mountain dog at Paws in Motion Veterinary Rehabilitation Center in Natick, which Starr opened in May 2004. The 101-pound pet suffers from elbow and hip dysplasia, or incongruity in the joints.

Paws in Motion's rehabilitation for dogs and cats is part of the growing billion pet industry, which also includes holistic care, home visits and pet food delivery services.

After an examination at Tufts Veterinary Hospital in Grafton, Basel's owner, Denise LaScaleia of Franklin, was told the dog would be totally lame by the time he was 3 years old. All four legs were bad.

"Because Basel has a combination of problems, there aren't any good surgical options available for him," said Starr. "This (treatment) makes him more comfortable and improves his quality of life. Like people, the water makes the animals more buoyant so the joints don't bear all the body weight."

Before the underwater treadmill and acupuncture, Basel walked with a great deal of pain, according to LaScaleia. "Since the treatment, I've seen an amazing difference in how he walks," she said. "He does not appear to have pain and has an increased range of motion and mobility. Cody and Basel are my boys."

The pampered pets have become members of the family, according to Starr.

"The majority of my clients either don't have kids or their kids are out of the house, so pets are their primary focus," Starr said. "My husband and I don't have children, we have two 3-year-old dogs -- Magnolia, a shepherd cross, and Matilda, a golden cross -- and both have orthopedic problems."

Which is what led Starr into veterinary rehabilitation.

"I didn't want to see them uncomfortable," said Starr. "The dogs were so young. I wanted to improve their function so they could live a comfortable life for 14 years. There weren't enough options for animals in chronic pain, so I needed to make some lifelong changes."

Starr's center also includes services such as cryo and heat therapy, massage, neuromuscular electrical stimulation and low-level laser treatments.

For pets not wild about water, the center also offers therapeutic exercise on a NordicTrack Treadmill, which Marco, a 7-year-old Pomeranian, was happy to ride. According to Starr, this is the best treatment for Marco, who is recovering from surgery for a dislocated hip after an incident with a larger dog. "It will bring him back to normal function sooner," she said.

Marco's weekly treatment begins with stretching on a red exercise ball followed by walking on the treadmill set at a 10 percent incline to strengthen his hind leg muscles.

"He's doing much better," said Marco's owner, James Devin of Waltham. "Marco is a good patient. He was running on three legs and not putting equal weight on his feet. Now he's lifting his left leg much less.

"He's like my child," Devin added. "I would do anything for him."

To improve a pet's quality of life at Paws in Motion, owners pay an initial fee and follow-up treatment costs range between and .

Because veterinary rehabilitation is a fairly new industry, and not many veterinarians offer such services, clients at Paws in Motion drive from as far as Medford, Melrose and Acton.

Since 1996, when Starr graduated from Tufts, she's seen major changes in trends toward more alternative medicine and more nutritional diets for pets.

When it comes to food, The Pet Pantry delivers.

Philip Long and his wife, Jennifer, opened a Pet Pantry franchise in Framingham in late 2004. The franchise sells and delivers dog and cat food made from a special formula of all-natural ingredients.

"That's the meat and potatoes of my business -- although the pet food doesn't have any potatoes in it," said a smiling Philip Long. "It's complete nutrition for dogs and cats."

On average the price for Pet Pantry Natural Premium dog food is .04 per pound for a 17.5- to 22-pound bag, compared to .15 for Science Diet Canine maintenance, .08 per pound for Purina O.N.E. Chicken & Rice and per pound for Iams Chunks/Mini Chunks, according to Long.

The Pet Pantry will deliver almost any amount a customer wants in MetroWest and the Milford area. A typical dog eats about 10 pounds of dog food a month. For bigger chewers, Long offers price breaks.

"We have a lean manufacturing distribution model," said Long. "There's no middle man. I own the warehouse, there's no brick-and-mortar storefront and no national advertising campaign. The product sells itself."

After researching items such as cat litter, dog biscuits and rawhide dog bones, Long found what he considers the best brand of each.

The Pet Pantry's corporate office, in Carson City, Nev., makes six different foods for active, overweight and older dogs, as well as food for young active cats, less active cats and a special formula for cats with urinary tract infections.

"It's like Haagen-Dazs ice cream," said Long. "As a kid, we eat all we want, but when we're over 40, we look for ice cream made with skim milk and a smaller scoop."

Long currently is developing alliances with several nonprofit animal rescue groups to provide free samples for dogs and cats before they leave the shelter with a new owner. If that owner becomes a client, Long makes a donation to the shelter.

"It's synergy," said Long. "Everybody wins. They potentially get a donation and I get a new customer."

Long is now embarking on a major telemarketing and door-hanging campaign, in which his three children will participate. Long paid ,000 for his franchise -- more than the approximate ,000 average fee for the 10-year old Pet Pantry business -- because his territory includes more single-family homes and potentially more customers.

For Long, previously a classical bassoon free-lancer in Boston for 15 years, and then a software consultant for 15 years, making a move to The Pet Pantry was easy since he and his wife love animals. The Longs have five cats and two dogs and all the animals like the food.

"Some companies add sugar and spray blood on the food. We just have good quality food," said Long. "Like a restaurant, it tastes better because of the quality."

When Long first heard about the franchise delivering food, he wished one was located in his neighborhood. "Then sometime later when I decided to start my own business, I remembered The Pet Pantry," he said. "As a consumer it looked good and for a business it looked good, too."

Ronna Kabler, a 19-year veterinarian, also makes trips to pets' homes. Last year she opened Waggin' Tails in Framingham, a multifaceted holistic veterinary business that includes house calls.

As a holistic doctor, Kabler looks at the whole picture, including the animal's environment, diet, emotional state and relationship with his owner or guardian. As part of her holistic philosophy, Kabler helps the animal heal itself. Kabler's special interest includes internal medicine, geriatrics or senior care, basic puppy care and education.

The Framingham veterinarian makes house calls in MetroWest, offers individual nutritional advice, complete with a wellness evaluation to keep the pet healthy, and consults with families on choosing the appropriate pet.

Kabler charges for an average examination plus travel time. Her consulting fees are time-based.

Currently, Kabler performs surgery at the Animal Hospital in Wellesley and in the future wants to offer other alternative therapies such as homeopathy to her Waggin' Tails business.

Kabler's holistic outlook toward pets started to change around 1990, about four years after graduating from Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine.

"Over time I felt there were limitations with a totally traditional medical practice," she said. "I looked at other modalities that offer better or safer alternatives. Holistic medicine treats the health of the whole animal as opposed to treating a symptom. As part of that, the quality of the food supply was also important for the nutrition of the animal."

Kabler saw a definite need for house calls.

"Lots of animals are anxious when they go to the vets, especially cats and certain dogs," said Kabler. "If you own multiple animals, it can be difficult to get them to the vet and older people often have a hard time getting out. The animals are more comfortable in their home environment."