

I'm Ready for My Close-Up, My Chew Toy, and a Tummy Rub, Mr. DeMille

By Liz Morrison



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If you're a movie star, you're privy to special treatment. Personal trainers, fabulous hairstylists, gourmet food, frequent massages, and lots of free time to relax and hang out with your buddies.

At Dogwood, a cage-free day care and playtime center for dogs, located in Los Angeles, every dog is treated like a star. In fact, their brochure clearly states "Star Treatment For Your Dog." This means that a Dogwood dog has the opportunity to experience personal training, fabulous grooming, great snacks, lots of tummy rubs, and hours to run and play with their buddies, or just lay around and nap. Now that's truly star treatment!

Dogwood, which has been open since August 2001, is the brainchild of Deborah Johnson, a businesswoman and Kate Judge, a certified dog trainer and canine behavioral specialist. Johnson initially met Judge when she brought her own dog, Cody, an Australian Blue Merle, to Judge for training.

"My love for dogs is basically what got me involved (in this business). I've grown up with dogs and I used to breed Afghan hounds. Then I met Kate and she was a trainer. That was the clincher. I thought we should do this together because she had the training and behavioral knowledge," Johnson said.

So how does Dogwood stand out from other urban doggie day care facilities? How about 9,000 square feet of fenced outdoor space? It's practically an estate. And in a metro-

politan setting like this one, it's unusual for a business to have so much private yard space. Dogwood's canine clients have the opportunity to romp and play in a large, safe outdoor environment while their "parents" have easy freeway access to its conveniently located Culver City location.

Another characteristic that makes Dogwood unique is its homey feel. When a dog is dropped off for the day, the first thing he or she sees is a warm inviting lobby complete with a fireplace. The "living room" area has several couches and beds with cozy blankets and pillows - perfect for that after snack nap. The TV is always tuned into the Animal Planet so they can catch up on all the Hollywood doggy gossip, and staff members are available for tummy rubs and ear scratching. And overnight guests have an open, cage-free environment inviting them to make themselves at home. Don't forget my bunny slippers, Mom!

"The overnight area is really relaxed. We don't ever put a dog in a kennel or any kind of cage. They get to sleep on their beds and they get to watch TV. (Other boarding facilities with cages) have a lot of noise at night, a lot of barking and we don't have anything like that. The dogs here are quiet. You'd never even know they were here," Johnson said.

Adding to the coziness of the daycare's interior is a series of paintings by local artist Cindy Short. Short, who calls her company Laughing Dog, is known for her dog portraits and

several adorn Dogwood's walls. Twenty percent of all proceeds from Short's portraits go to various dog rescue groups.

Johnson and Judge's latest venture is the Dogwood Café, which will be located outdoors on the daycare premises adjacent to the kitchen. Initially they plan to serve typical coffee house fare - coffee, tea, soft drinks, bagels, and pastries - and possibly expand to sandwiches and other foods in the future.

The café will serve as a relaxing place for the doggy "parents" to socialize with each other. Johnson noticed that several of her clients would run into friends as they were picking up their dogs after work. The lobby was too small to accommodate several people with dogs on leashes so the idea of the café was born. Now, humans and dogs will have a place to sit down, have a snack and enjoy a conversation. How about a Milk Bone with that latte?

"We'll have umbrella tables and clients can go and have a coffee and a snack, and sit and relax. The dogs can go there as well and we'll put out dog bowls with water and the dogs can either hang out together or hang out with their owners. People can have a chance to meet each other and spend a little time talking, especially now with the traffic," Johnson said referring to the horrendous Los Angeles rush hour commute.

In order to qualify for enrollment at Dogwood, each dog must be spayed or neutered (unless they are under

four months old), must be current on all shots, and be non-aggressive and comfortable with other dogs. The owners and the dog are interviewed and Judge, using her canine behavioral skills, gives each dog an aggression test.

Before teaming up with Johnson, Judge, who has two dogs of her own, Annie a Husky mix and Louie an Australian shepherd mix, worked at another daycare facility as an attendant while she pursued her career as a certified dog trainer through Animal Behavior & Training Associates (ABTA).

"I had gotten laid off as an executive assistant and I could not deal with going back into the corporate world again. I decided I wanted to do something that I loved. Dogs were always a great passion of mine. I started taking my dog Louie to (obedience) training classes and I started talking to Louie's trainer. She suggested that I become a trainer myself," Judge said.

Judge believes fate had a lot to do with her going into business with Johnson, who was one of her first training clients after she became a certified dog trainer. With a common love of dogs, they hit it off immediately and began discussing plans for opening their own doggie daycare center.

For an extra fee, Judge offers training and behavior modification to Dogwood clients. Using only praise, positive reinforcement, and tasty treats, Judge teaches her canine clients how to break bad habits like digging and chewing, and become better companions. She also teaches basic obedience commands. Training is offered during daycare hours and owners are encouraged to take at least one class with their dog to learn the training techniques as well.

A typical day at Dogwood begins with the arrival of each dog in the morning. Once they greet Johnson and Judge, they immediately look for their friends. Johnson and Judge have noticed that dogs, like people, gravitate towards certain types of dogs and form strong bonds. Often a dog that arrives early will wait at the front gate for his favorite friends. Most of the day is unstructured time with the dogs doing exactly as they please.

Some romp and run with other dogs, some find a quiet place to relax, others play in the small, plastic swimming pool. When it comes time for playgroups, Johnson, Judge and other

staff members throw balls and Frisbees for the dogs to chase. And if one of the dogs is having a birthday, the yard is turned into a party area complete with birthday hats, a special doggie birthday cake, and Frosty Paws (ice cream type treats made especially for dogs). Movie stars should have it this good.

Occasionally, when customers request it, a couple of staff members will take a few adventuresome dogs on a "field trip" for a hike in a canyon or a run on the beach. For those dogs that need to look their best at the end of the day, Dogwood has a groomer on site, and as an added safety precaution, a veterinarian is located just minutes away from the daycare facility. Field trips, grooming, bathing, and training are all available for an extra fee.

No dog is considered to be too small for Dogwood. Small dogs are offered their own separate area, which is fenced off. But some smaller dogs like being with the larger dogs. When dogs are new to Dogwood, Johnson is very cautious about where they play and with which playgroup, but as the dog becomes more acclimated, there are fewer restrictions.

"It depends on the dog and what the owner tells us. If there are a bunch of large dogs out (in the yard) running and playing pretty hard, I don't want the smaller dogs out there but later in the afternoon we may put them all together. We have a Yorkie that's just in love with a Rhodesian Ridgeback. She struts around like she doesn't realize she's smaller than he is," Johnson explained.

After an active morning of chasing balls and playing with their friends, some of the dogs will stretch out on the comfy couches and beds indoors and take a much-deserved snooze. Throughout the day, there are snacks, lots of petting and cuddling, and all the love and attention a dog could possibly want.

Michelle Wytko was one of Dogwood's very first customers. In fact she was a customer before they officially opened. Apparently, Orion, her three-year-old Rhodesian Ridgeback, was tearing up her house during the day and needed an outlet for all that energy. Wytko saw Dogwood's sign while driving one day and decided to give them a call. She feels the owners, Johnson and Judge, are what make Dogwood such an outstanding facility, and the fact that they

have a huge outdoor area for the dogs to enjoy.

"I had looked desperately for an indoor/outdoor facility because all of the indoor facilities I had been in weren't nice. I was so thrilled to find an indoor/outdoor facility where he could run and play. And everybody (at Dogwood) was so great. We have had no incidents (of the dog being destructive) since daycare (at Dogwood). He comes home so tired that he doesn't have the energy to be destructive anymore," Wytko said.

Daria Simolke, another long time Dogwood client, used to feel guilty when she took her dogs to other daycare facilities. When she discovered Dogwood, however, all those guilt feelings disappeared like fleas after a good grooming.

"It's such a nice place, a pretty place and such a happy, comfortable and safe place. Now I think (my dogs) are having all the fun. I want to stay at Dogwood with my dogs. I want to have snacks. I want to take a nap in the tent. I want to play with all the other dogs," Simolke said. Simolke is also involved with Collie Rescue and said she would not hesitate to leave any of her rescued collies at Dogwood should she ever have a need to board them.

Because Johnson and Judge have such a strong love of animals, they are involved with various rescue groups and animal related charitable organizations in the Los Angeles area. Two groups in particular are the Amanda Foundation, a nonprofit organization that rescues dogs and cats from shelters, and Bow Wow Meow, an art festival that features a silent auction, pet adoption information, and various pet related vendors.

At the end of another dog day afternoon, as the sun slowly sets over the Pacific, Kate Judge and Deborah Johnson wave goodbye to their canine clients. And on the drive home we know that each dog is feeling relaxed and rejuvenated from yet another day of star treatment - Dogwood style.

Dogwood is located at 8652 Venice Boulevard in Los Angeles and can be reached at 310-559-DOGS(3647) or online at djdogwood@aol.com. Their web address is www.dogwooddogs.com. Artist Cindy Short can be reached online at <http://www.laughingdogart.com>