

SCHAUMBURG REVIEW

Fetch!-ing job

Animal lover's passion leads to new business

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Schaumburg resident Joe Zeiler has a bird, two cats, two dogs, four big fish tanks and six sugar gliders — an Australian marsupial resembling genetic blends of possum and squirrel, he explained, prompted by raised eyebrows.

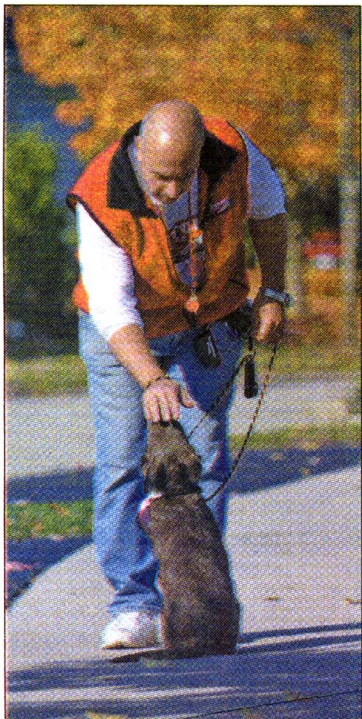
A former pet store owner for 14 years in Hillside and Arlington Heights, Zeiler is now a professional dog walker.

Zeiler is all about animals. Watch him romp with Lexi, a well-behaved, green-eyed, 14-week-old silver Labrador retriever.

When both flopped on a sidewalk to play wrestle and a belly rub for Lexi, it was hard telling who enjoyed it more.

In February, Zeiler bought franchise rights to Fetch! Pet Care, a national pet sitting and dog walking service based in Berkeley, Calif., with 7,000 customers. Fetch! Founder and CEO Paul Mann has plans for opening 10 franchises in the Chicago area.

Mann, a former systems organizer for IBM and Estee Lauder, saw a business opportunity when he noticed Baby



Joe Zeiler, owner of a Fetch! franchise, praises 14-week-old Lexi for her obedience while walking her.

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Joe Zeiler, owner of a Fetch! franchise, walks 14-week-old Lexi.

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Boomers and young professionals were opting for busy careers and not children.

"People, I believed, were humanizing pets and spending money on them. They didn't want to stick their pets into kennels while away. They wanted good care," said Mann, 42.

"Pets have become support systems for many people. In this crazy world, we still have home with a happy, loving pet waiting. People will spend money on that."

Since starting Fetch!, Zeiler has hired 11 contracted pet sitters for 30 clients servicing the northwest suburbs and beyond.

On a warm autumn afternoon, he spent 30 minutes walking Lexi in East Dundee. On average, he walks dogs four days a week, but will take care of customers 24/7 whether it's pet walking, sitting, boarding or chauffeuring them around in his vehicle for grooming appointments.

Zeiler said Fetch! interested him because the company had procedures and policies in place that consistently served customers. Fetch! pet sitters devote much time to communicating with clients, he said.

For instance, Fetch! employees receive training and meet with new clients to choose services and get to know their pets.

Other care services include dog park field trips, medicine injections, baths,

nail trimmings and medication or food pick-up and delivery, among others.

Zeiler said his investment in the franchise was minimal, but he expected profitable returns.

"I came across Fetch! and liked what I saw. Of course, the good money to be made was a factor, but a personal goal was serving clients and becoming part of a pet's life," he said.

Meghan Soens, of Palatine, hired Fetch! last spring because of its ability to accept last-minute requests for her boxer, Athena.

"We're a young professional couple and not at home that much. Fetch! can care for Athena on our planned weekends away or when we get stuck at work," said Soens, a marketer in the northwest suburbs.

Elk Grove Village resident Pam Dettman said Fetch! was far more reliable than a previous pet care business she used.

"The other service had only one employee who was not doing the full 30-minute walk, we found out. Fetch! is organized and has a lot of employees," said Dettman, human resources director for a floor mat manufacturer.

"They send you e-mails, text messages and leave little notes each day on what our dog, Chip, did that day. We use Fetch! Monday through Friday."

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