

DES MOINES

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DM pet sitter is honored as tops in 2010

Alicia Hartman, who has cystic fibrosis, works for a local franchise to care for animals she loves.

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A lifelong love of animals led Alicia Hartman of east Des Moines to dedicate her life to caring for critters, but her work as a pet caregiver while battling cystic fibrosis led her to receive the honor of 2010 pet sitter of the year by the national Fetch! Pet Care franchise.

Des Moines' Fetch opened just a couple of years ago by owners Eric and Lorrie Culp of Des Moines. Hartman, a trained veterinary technician, was hired early on. The pet sitters' job is to care for pets while their owners are away. Hartman has more than 25 clients and said she couldn't do her job without the help of several others.

"I've been in the hospital four times since September and I couldn't have continued without the help of my sister and the other pet sitters," Hartman said. "I feel that I represent all of us in Des Moines and want everyone to celebrate this with me."

Because of her genetic illness, Hartman is considered legally disabled, but her work as a pet sitter allows for flexibility with scheduling that accommodates her health. It allows her to use her extensive training in animal care and continue dog training on the side.

"I've been involved in animal rescue since I was in my teens," she said. "I got my veterinary technology degree before I ever had my high school diploma. I've done internships with veterinarians and am doing apprentice work now to become a wildlife rehabilitation specialist."

Hartman also volunteers to transport animals from other states every Saturday to get them

HARTMAN

FROM PAGE 1

out of "kill shelters." She also does animal-assisted therapy and will be involving her own dogs in that soon, and she supports fundraising events for the Animal Rescue League of Iowa.

"My life is pretty much pets," Hartman said.

Having grown up "socially awkward" due to her disease, Hartman said she's always understood animals and worked well with them.

Hartman benefits with her own health by walking dogs outside in the fresh air.

"I have a natural understanding of animals and enjoy their unconditional love," she said.

She learned that the Culp family had nominated her in November for the award, and learned she had won when they asked her to stop by.

"Lorrie read me the letter saying I'd won, then handed me a plaque and they shot a photo of me. I couldn't believe it," Hartman said. "With an economy like it is, watching my friends

and family members get laid off, unable to find work, struggling to make ends meet, I'm doing a job I love. It's a hobby that pays me. I definitely wouldn't be able to do this job without Eric, Lorrie, my sister and the other pet sitters."

Lorrie Culp commended Hartman on her work and said she and her husband are thrilled that she was recognized with the award.

"We've been in business three years this April and we're a fairly small franchise compared to those

across the country," Culp said. "Alicia just does an excellent job, and when I sent in her nomination, I knew she had a good chance of winning. She just does such a good job."

"Her past experience, her diversity of animal care, the fact that she can take care of just about any type of animal — she's even trained in different modes of physical therapy for animals and can give injections. She's just a real can-do person who's always eager to help out. The animals also really respond to her."