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KATHLEEN LAVINE | BUSINESS JOURNAL

Nicole Delmoro owns City Bark and Meow, a doggy day care center at 370 Kalamath St.

Taking a bite out of guilt

Day-care centers relieve busy urban pet owners

BY AMY BRYER
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Doggy day care professionals make no bones about it—their industry is meant to relieve the pressure of the guilt-ridden dog owner.

Centers like City Bark and Meow target single professionals who don't necessarily have kids, but treat their pets like family.

Guilt begot the very concept of City Bark. Owner Nicole Delmoro, a former accountant, felt guilty about leaving her dog at home when she was pulled into a project at 5 p.m. and forced to work until 10 p.m.

"I had adopted my dog from the shelter because he had been there for six weeks and I thought, 'I can give him a better life than this,'" Delmoro said. "But because of my schedule, I couldn't give him the life I wanted to give him."

So Delmoro started her own day care for dogs. It even offers an Internet-connected "Web cam," so owners can watch their dogs play while they're at work.

But doggy day-care centers offer more than just a place to play. Research shows that dog socialization is important in preventing aggressive behavior.

Aside from alleviating the guilt of the owner, dogs exercise while working on their social skills with other dogs to avoid angry-dog confrontations during walks in the park.

"Dogs that lack socialization in the first and second year are more likely to have dog aggression," animal behaviorist Kari Bastyr said.

Bastyr has worked with aggressive dogs for 10 years and teaches behavior classes out of City Bark. She is on the staff at South Penn Animal Hospital in Washington Park.

DETAILS

- There are 68 million dogs in the United States.
- City Bark day care prices range from \$18 for a 10-day package or \$22 for individual days.
- City Bark will sponsor an open house for Table Mountain Animal Shelter to raise money for the shelter July 26 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Log onto www.tablemountainanimals.org/events.htm for more information.
- City Bark and Meow is located at 370 Kalamath St. in Denver. Call 303-573-9400 for more information about the doggy day care center. Its Web cam, where you can watch the dogs, is located at www.citybark.com.

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And it's not just about play. Delmoro said her specialists at the day care work with the dogs to reinforce good behavior.

"They are just here to let play—we want to send back a better animal by reinforcing commands," she said.

That's one of the reasons Matt and Cory Fox like to take their 2-year-old Irish Terrier, Boo Radley, to City Bark. (Radley is named after the character in "To Kill a Mockingbird.")

"The staff is great because they really love our dog and they do a little training on the side," Matt Fox said. "They have more staff than I usually see at these centers... and my dog comes home extremely exhausted and more manageable."

Fox also appreciates the kennel on site that they can use when they leave town.

Like many of Denver's canine day-care centers, City Bark doubles as a kennel. The Denver-area Yellow Pages list more than 40 dog day-care centers, but City Bark is one of the newest additions, having opened in March.

As people have fewer kids—and more disposable income—pet owners want to indulge the only family they may have, Bastyr said.

City Bark is in the process of expanding its 10,000-square-foot outdoor play area into a full-fledged dog park with hills, ponds and tunnels. To cater to its single professional clientele, City Bark plans to host an Aug. 7 singles' happy hour and half-price day care to launch the opening of its dog park.

Delmoro said she is considering whether to expand the business to include more cat services.