



CARLOS CHAVEZ/ARIZONA BUSINESS GAZETTE

Grooming manager Jayne Haines keeps Sammie looking good at the Villa La Paws Resort and Spa in Phoenix. The cage-free facility offering dog day care and training classes expanded in the recession.

Sniffing out success

Affordability, service help dog day-care business grow

By Georgann Yara
SPECIAL FOR THE ABG

What started as an alternative to retirement has turned into a growing business venture for Tom Murray, president and CEO of Villa La Paws Resort and Spa.

And despite the recession,

Murray's Phoenix-based dog day-care and boarding business has expanded to two locations since it opened in 2005.

His cage-free facility appeals to canine owners, who come from as far as Queen Creek and Avondale, when they need day care or boarding

services for their pooches, Murray said. Mindful of the economy, Murray started holding what he called recession-buster days on Mondays and Saturdays, when day-care services are \$18. These have proven to be popular with cus-

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Focus on service helps dog day-care business expand

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tomers, he said.

"Some of them have lost their jobs or they don't have a lot of money, but they still value that one day they can bring their dog here," Murray said. "We're not immune to the economy. We're not recession-proof, but we are recession-resistant. It gets back to providing that service level."

Villa La Paws also offers grooming, pet sitting and dog-training courses. The popularity of the courses sparked the addition of a new indoor/outdoor training-academy facility, adjacent to its original location on Bell Road, that opened in May.

Classes include behavioral and obedience training, service and therapy dog training. The new Hollywood Dogs course that teaches the basics of auditions, screen work and photo shoots has been especially popular.

Pat Severance's Lab-golden retriever mix, Patina, just completed the Hollywood course. The Scottsdale dog owner has been going to Villa La Paws for more than three years for the classes, grooming and day care. She likes the webcams throughout the facility that allow her to



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Villa La Paws Resort and Spa keeps pooches and their owners happy with its "recession-buster days" offered on Mondays and Saturdays.

keep an eye on her dog whenever and whenever she wants.

"The people there are very warm and they make you feel special. They know your dog's name and are very personal. It's not like you're a number," she said.

Severance said Patina's demeanor after day care indicates she enjoyed herself.

"When she gets home, she is very mellow. She's wagging her tail, she seems really happy. When she gets finished at Villa La Paws, she sleeps for the

night," Severance said.

Murray had spent 30 years in the computer consulting industry, building, selling and running various companies. In 2005, he decided to retire and spend more time at home with his family instead of on an airplane and in business meetings.

But the retirement life wasn't what Murray anticipated. He grew bored of playing golf and spending time on home-improvement projects.

"I did a terrible job of planning my retirement," Murray

Villa La Paws Resort and Spa

Where: 2734 W. Bell Road, Suite 1390, Phoenix; 10640 N. 32nd St., Phoenix.

Employees: 32.

Interesting fact: U.S. pet owners spend \$3.4 billion on grooming and boarding annually, according to the American Pet Products Association.

More information: 602-588-7833, 602-442-7833, www.villalapaws.com.

said.

He came up with two business plans, one inspired by the 2004 death of his son's golden retriever.

Murray discovered the dog's body in his home at 2 a.m. He didn't know what to do, and at the time he could not find a service that would take it away and properly dispose of it. He followed the only advice he received and rolled up the dog in a rug and put it in the alley.

When his son awoke and asked where his dog was, Murray broke the sad news. Upon

hearing where the body was, Murray's distressed son asked him, "So, is that what you would do with me?"

Murray felt terrible. He researched and found out only big-box companies provided mobile pet services. He filed this memory away and a year later put it into a business plan that resulted in Villa La Paws.

At first, he provided only out-bound services, including pet sitting and limo-transportation service to and from veterinarian appointments. He came up with the no-cage day care and boarding concept and bought his original facility on Bell Road. In 2007, he opened a second facility on 32nd Street.

Most clients are working professionals that come a few times a week or don't have time to exercise their dogs. They also would like their dog to become accustomed to playing with other dogs.

"We have so many responsible pet owners, and we do care about their four-legged kids," Murray said. "I brought some of the business world into this party, but I've learned so much being surrounded by neat people who know animals inside and out. It's amazing and today, I'm rejuvenated."