

## ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT • SUCCESSFUL SMALL BUSINESS

# The Pet Bed & Breakfast

Melanie Walker makes her motel for pets less like a kennel and more like home, reports Iris Winston.

Three cats relax on feline-sized bunk beds, which are supported by carpet-covered scratching posts. A fourth checks out the contents of the aquarium down the hall, before pausing in front of the glass door of the private suite where two ferrets frolic.

Meanwhile, upstairs, two other cat boarders, tired after scrambling over a complex structure and playing hide-and-seek in the kitchen cupboards (specially equipped with tunnels and cushions), enjoy a little quiet time snuggled up on comfortable couches.

A delicate black feline saunters over, purring a greeting, clearly at ease in the spacious setting.

A less outgoing ginger cat tolerates a stroke on the head before returning to bird-watching at a large window.

There are no cages in this 2,000-square-foot boarding kennel. Instead, cats are free to roam around a large section of the two-storey building. Owner Melanie Walker, 36, designed the Pet Bed & Breakfast to give cats and other small animals an alternative home when their owners are away.

"I figured that there was a real need for a facility like this," says Ms. Walker, who began her animal-minding service by pet sitting various companion animals in their own homes. "I always had this in mind, but wanted to see whether there was a market before I moved into it full time."

The increased demand for her pet-sitting services and the positive response from boarders and their owners since she set up the B&B indicate that there is a market, she says, despite the slowing of travel after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. In the six months that the facility has been open, she has had several return visitors and, even with as many as nine cats in one room, has had only one cat that showed any aggression toward his companions.

"The place is designed with lots of height and space, so that each cat has his own spot," points out Ms. Walker. "And the cats are not in their own territory. This is neutral space for all of them. I knew it would work."

Unlike a kennel, the facility features a large ceramic-tiled kitchen and several pieces of furniture "liberated" from Ms. Walker's home. The place is staffed around the clock.

"There has to be someone here for the animals 24 hours," she says, adding that this also simplifies the care of special-needs animals requiring regular injections or medication.

Ms. Walker, who has a background in financial planning and previously ran a general contracting business, did much of the construction work in the B&B herself.



ROD MACIVOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Melanie Walker regrets she has not time to own a pet. But, then, all the pets she minds for others become like her pets.

"In fact, I bought this space, while I still had the construction business, so I had access to contractors for the things I couldn't do, but I saved a lot of money because I did so much of the work myself."

The cost of purchasing the building and renovating the space, about \$80,000, was also more economical than renting, she adds, estimating her average monthly operating expenses at under \$1,500. "The insurance for the care and control of animals and hydro costs are high. I want to make sure that the temperature is always comfortable for the animals," she

says. "And right now I'm putting a lot into advertising in different areas of the city to test the response."

Arranging a mortgage ("actually a buy-back from the vendor, and quite usual in commercial parks") through the previous owner of the property meant that she did not need bank financing for the venture. She did, however, have to have the property rezoned to allow a kennel.

At this time, she says, she is constantly reinvesting in the B&B, which has a rack rate of \$15 a night. Also, discounts are available, based on the number

of animals per family and the length of the stay.

"I have lots of plans — things like new kinds of climbing structures for the cats and more separate units for special-needs animals," says Ms. Walker.

Further plans include expanding the operation into developing a line of cat treats and a new kitty litter system. She also hopes to make the company's Web site interactive. "I want to be able to have customers log on and find their cats. But with so many hiding places for the animals, they may have to check more than

once."

Her only regret is that the demands of running the Pet B&B make it impossible for her to own a pet. The compensation, she says, is that "I consider all the animals I look after my animals — I'm with them so much — and I feel really bold about this business. I know that the need is there and that there is nothing else quite like it in the city."

*Pet Bed & Breakfast is located at 5460 Canotek Rd., Unit 101. The telephone number is 748-3585. The Web site is [www.petbedandbreakfast.ca](http://www.petbedandbreakfast.ca).*