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Ruff day at work

Big, wet kisses and scooping poop come with the territory.

By Matt Gonzales

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At her old job as an information technology specialist, Brigitte Baker cleaned up excrement -- metaphorically speaking. Her current job, however, requires her to do it for real. And she loves it.

As the owner and operator of Barkalounge, a "doggy daycare" that also offers obedience training on the city's Southside, Baker spends her days watching anywhere from five to 25 dogs. Owners bring them there, she said, primarily for "socialization and exercise." Indeed, the Barkalounge bustles with social activity: Barks of various volumes and timbres echo through the hallway, which is decorated, quite naturally, with a framed photo of dogs playing poker.

Baker recently spoke to INTake, as she fended off tongue kisses from her daycare residents, about how doggy daycare differs from a kennel and why she prefers cleaning dog excrement to the metaphorical kind.

How did you come upon the idea of a dog daycare?

I had come to a harsh reality with my old job. I enjoyed the people I worked with, but you can like the people you are working with, but not necessarily what you are doing. And I was absolutely miserable.

I remember getting to the point where I was thinking, 'I shouldn't have to fight to get out of bed in the morning. I should be happy. I should be



A dog's life: Barkalounge owner Brigitte Baker, 40, (right) and Ashley Strong, 23, hang out with canine companions (left to right) Parker, Gracie, Romeo (front), Madison and Pacey. -- Tom Klubens / For INTake

Barkalounge

- **Where:** 5555 Elmwood Ave.
- **How much:** Single visit: \$25. 10-day prepaid pass: \$230. Overnight slumber parties (available for approved clients): \$11 per night, in addition to day pass/package rate.
- **Info:** (317) 788-8551.

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excited.' It seems so ridiculous that it wasn't apparent before -- I have a business degree, an MBA, I've been in management for years, I am great at marketing and I adore animals and I want to be with my dogs all day.

How is this different from a kennel?

A kennel is primarily dog in a box. There are no interaction points. The dogs are in a crate. Regardless of how nice that is, a dog has to be able to tolerate that. There also isn't a separation point. They are right next to each other. There are wonderful places and several good ones around town, but here we have rooms with daybeds and sofas in all of them, and it's a relaxed atmosphere. There aren't 300 other dogs barking and general craziness.

What's the procedure for introducing a new dog to the daycare?

First I interview the owner to get a feel for the dog. Has the dog ever had any social activity? What do they do when they see another dog? Then, I get copies of the vaccination records to make sure on everything. Then there's the dog profile. What can you tell me about your dog? All of that goes into my database, we schedule a time for the dog to come in and decide how best to integrate the dog. If they've been to daycares before, or go to dog parks regularly or socialize with friend's dogs, then they're usually fine.

What if they're not used to social activity?

If there is any concern or hint of aggression, or if there is any instance of aggression, I'm extremely selective, and I'll talk to the owner before bringing the dog here. But what a lot of people think aggression is isn't necessarily aggression. It's appropriate for a dog to snarl or growl. That's a warning.

It's no different from me saying to you, 'You're too close. Please back up.' But if I have any concerns, I'll bring them in, and I'll bring out one other dog -- what I call an ambassador of goodwill -- a dog who loves everybody, is not dominant, more the submissive type and just very playful. We'll see how they interact, and if there's any concern that I see there, I can't take the dog.

Why are some people better at

begins Aug. 2 and runs through Sept. 20.
Cost is \$100.

About this job

Best part of the job: "There aren't 5000 angry e-mails waiting for me, a bunch of nasty voicemails or five million crises backed up at the door," Baker said. "I walk in here and you know what I get? I get met with love, tail wags and big sloppy wet kisses. Every day, that's what I get. How could that be a bummer?"

Worst part of the job: "Sometimes biting my tongue," she said. "You can only give so much advice and sometimes that's the harder part. I can't always make a suggestion about what might be more appropriate for the dog. It's not my dog, and if you have one you see charging all over their owner, out of control and really difficult to lead, that's not impossible to change. But the owner may not necessarily want that change."

Perks: "Did I say big sloppy wet kisses? Also, just being happy and surrounding myself with others who think the same way."

Qualifications: "You need experience with not just animals but with dogs, and an understanding of dog communication and how to deal with them. I put everybody through the ringer, and watch them interact with the dogs. I want to see how they interact. I want to see what they do. Are they freaked out when a dog comes up to them? Will they take control of the situation when the dogs come running at them?"

communicating with dogs than others?

It's not mind reading, it's not mental telepathy and it's not some bizarre communication that other people don't have. We all have the capacity.

It's just understanding that communication isn't the same for animals as it is for us. We send so many inconsistent messages. We tell them one thing and then communicate 33 different things with our hands, eyes and head. Dogs are very visual and they look at our visual signals.

Most trainers will tell you that they can train a dog in a heartbeat, but training the human is the hard part.

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