

# A BUSINESS UNLEASHED

By Ben Mackin



Corry Miller Photography

In today's economy it is not uncommon for someone to take a part-time job when they already have a full-time career. What is considerably less common is leaving the career and building the part-time job into a successful, award-winning business. That is exactly what Michelle Daikos did with Wagging Tails Dog Walking and Pet Sitting of Williamsburg.

The Hampton Roads native was working as an interior designer in northern Virginia when the opportunity to moonlight as a dog walker first came up. At the time Michelle had been using a dog walking service to walk her dog every day while she was at work. After utilizing the company for a while she found out they were in need of help. They had more clients than staff, so Michelle volunteered to work for them part-time. "The service, Woofies, was incredibly busy. So, I started helping them out on the weekends. I was happy to do it and it meant some extra cash for me to play with." From those few hours a week, Michelle was hooked. "I grew to love it. It is so rewarding because the dogs and animals are so happy to see you," Michelle says, laughing.

During the time Michelle spent working for Woofies, she was able to learn the at-home pet care business from the ground up. That experience would come in handy in 2013 when she made the decision to leave her interior design job in northern Virginia and come back to the area. The main reason she moved was to be closer to her mother, but in doing so would provide her a chance to make big professional changes. "I rented out my condo and moved back down to Williamsburg. For work I needed something that was flexible so I would be able to help my mother. So, I thought dog walking would be a perfect thing to do." With that, Wagging Tails was born.

As anyone who has ever started their own business can tell you, Michelle was facing an uphill battle. Luckily the owners of Woofies, Leslie Barron and Amy Reed, mentored her. Taking what she learned from her former employers, Michelle used a

similar business model to mold her company into the success that it is today. "I was lucky to have them to lean on and help me with all the challenges that came across," she says. "Even with the help, I have to say the biggest challenge was starting off on my own." For her, the fun part was the marketing and business development, but the challenge was being the only staff member, running the business and walking dogs around the clock yet not being big enough to hire anyone. As she grew her client list, Michelle was gradually able to hire a small staff, though it did not stay small for long.

Michelle is quick to point out that a lot of the company's success is due in part to her staff. The team has several members who have spent years working as veterinary technicians or volunteering in shelters. They even have a zoologist who has spent time working in zoos up and down the east coast. "They absolutely love what they do, which is great. I love working with a staff who are happy to come to work every day. We have our challenges from time to time, but we always work them out."

Other than hard work, Michelle credits the firm's success to a number of factors. She says organizational measures like software management systems help keep her and her team

in sync with each other and their clients. Another measure Wagging Tails relies on is professional training and certifications for all the employees. "Being licensed and insured as well as being certified in pet first aid is key. We also perform background checks, all of which are essential to gaining the client's trust," Michelle says. Being a pet owner herself, Michelle knows how disconcerting it can be for a stranger to have access to not only the family pet but the entire house as well. "We put everything into place that would really make people feel comfortable. We are not the next door neighbor's kid. We are actually certified, professional people walking into your home."

With an expert staff, Wagging Tails is able to render detailed services to the pets and their families. "When we set up a new client, we like to have a 'meet and greet'. We go over there and meet the dogs and owner, and the objective is to learn the routine so that we can recreate it when the owner is gone." Keeping to a routine is one of the reasons services like Wagging Tails are so popular. "A good example is an overnight. If the client's dog sleeps in the bed with them, then that's what we'll do. If the client normally gets home from work, feeds the dog, then snuggles with them on

the sofa, that's what we do." Michelle finds this not only alleviates anxiety for the dog, but for the owner as well. "All of these things make the dog so much more comfortable. If you take the dog to a kennel, not only is the owner gone, but you are taking the pet completely out of their environment. So our focus is to keep the routine going."

On top of the walking and sitting, Wagging Tails also offers a pet taxi that will pick your dog up from the house and take them to and from the vet or groomer. "We'll even go to the airport. We pick up dogs who have been flown in or we'll drop them off to get on the plane," she says, laughing.

On top of diversifying their clientele, Michelle is looking to add dog training to their already long list of services. "With the upcoming dog training, we are growing and hiring new staff while maintaining that level of top notch service."

With her company on solid footing in the area it is safe to say that Michelle Daikos has no regrets about leaving her old job behind. "This is my passion and definitely a breath of fresh air," she says thoughtfully. "I mean, who doesn't love animals? I have never worked harder in my life, but I have never felt such satisfaction and reward." **NON**