

Sit-A-Pet Celebrates 30 Years on the Hill

BY HEATHER SCHOELL

30 Years!

In 1980, Debbie Hollander had just graduated with a degree in management, and was wondering what to do with her life. After leaving an unrewarding hotel job and a 6-month gig shrink-wrapping gift baskets for Capitol Hill Wine and Cheese, she took the advice of a friend who had heard of a pet-sitting service in Ohio. "I didn't know if it would fly," she said. "There was the trust issue, letting people into your house to take care of your pet." She took a chance, placing an ad in the Hill Rag. Her home phone started ringing.

Thirty years later, Sit-A-Pet is on the Hill, in Maryland and in Virginia. "It doesn't seem like it's been 30 years, because I love what I'm doing," she said. "What a wonderful way to earn a living – making pets happy," said Debbie, who attributes Sit-A-Pet's longevity to her passion for animals. "From elephants to spiders," she said. "This may sound corny, but it's absolutely true. I only hire people to work with me who share this passion."

Animal People

Massage therapist Monika Holland has been working part-time for Sit-A-Pet for 10 years and was a zookeeper at the National Zoo for 14 years. "I love animals," she said. "It's a lot of fun going to visit with other people's pets and playing with them. All the animals I visit are happy to see me, so it's very rewarding."

Pam Causer, whose diabetic cat, Mimi, will be 21 years old on Bastille Day, said of SAP, "Coverage is never a problem. Monika is tremendous. She loves Mimi. Christmas before last when I was away, she took a picture of Mimi and made it into a Christmas card – it was waiting for me when I got home." Pam has used SAP for three years – she's still considered a "new" client.



Debbie Hollander with Charles and Camilla, photo courtesy of Sit-A-Pet.

A 15-year-old boy cat named Rosie, blind in one eye and diabetic, and Bella, his 5-year-old housemate, call Jan Johnson their favorite sitter. Bonnie Andrees, a 25-year client and their owner, said of Jan, "She is wonderful, has a calm personality. The cats don't come out for a lot of people, but they come out for her. She brings in the mail, puts out bird food in the front and back feeders – it's kitty TV. She spends time here – you can tell because when we come back, the cats don't seem like they missed us!"

Jan has been a Sit-A-Pet sitter for 24 years. "I've enjoyed every minute of it," she said. "It's so entertaining – I love the animal world. There's hardly a block on the Hill that I haven't been in one house or another. I try to do as much as I can do as the owners do. Animals are much happier when they're in their own homes instead of a kennel."

Louis Perry has a dog with special needs – a three-legged Rottweiler named Nubia. Jan is their primary sitter, but on occasion, Monika has filled in. "Jan is wonderful, a caring lady who loves animals to no end,"

he said. "They take care of the house, bringing in the mail. They leave a note on how the walks went. Nubia enjoys Monika's massages, and they know how to handle a dog that needs extra coaxing."

"Our sitters go above and beyond," Debbie explained. "One sitter went running to the airport when she saw the client had left his passport. During a blizzard, a sitter cross-country skied to the clients' homes. One time a contractor sealed the cat under the tub – the sitter heard the meowing. And another client was wondering why the water bill was so high – the sitter caught the cat flushing the toilet!"

The Business End

"SAP was the first pet-sitting service in the region," said Debbie. "The concept was unheard of before I started. We have developed a very loyal client base, and much of our business comes from client referrals, and we've been rated Best Pet Sitting Service in every pet issue of Washingtonian Magazine."

"I can recommend Sit-A-Pet

from all aspects," said Kathy Meyer, who became a client for her two cats when she moved to DC from Baltimore in 2000. In 2004 she became a sitter for their Arlington clients, and in 2006 she became SAP's manager.

Clients new to Sit-A-Pet call Kathy to set up an initial meeting in the home with the sitter. That sitter will become "theirs," bonding with the pet, and keeps the house key, coded with no identifying name or address. Thereafter, Kathy schedules sittings. "There are two things that clients trust us with – their pets and their homes. Both are secure with us," she said.

"Pet sitting is an extremely personalized service," said Debbie. "As the modes of communication have come to include texting and emails, it's a challenge to constantly maintain a personal connection. We strongly encourage our clients to call us. There is nothing that can replace an actual conversation about the health and well being of your pet."

For more information on Sit-A-Pet, visit www.sitapet.com or call 202-362-8900.

Heather Schoell is a regular contributor to Capital Community News and can be reached at hschoell@verizon.net. ★

Sit-A-Pet Sitters on the Hill:

Jan Johnson - 24 years
 Monika Holland - 10 years
 Joel Kubicki - 10 years
 Jolene Conko - 11 years
 Inger Mobley - 12 years

That's a combined total of 67 years of pet sitting experience!