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MARYLAND JOURNAL

His job is not just puppy love

Dog walker says he treats each canine charge like his own
Maryland Journal

December 03, 2007 | By Stephen Kiehl | Stephen Kiehl, SUN REPORTER

Matt Fisher has walked Chari around the block a few times, taken her to play with another black Labrador mix, and walked her home. But something is missing.

Finally, in front of Chari's Bolton Hill home, Fisher leads the dog into the garden. She sniffs, takes her time, and at last accomplishes her task. Fisher is triumphant. The walk was a success.

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When you walk dogs for a living, you take the victories where they come. Inside the [house](#), Fisher leaves a note for Chari's owners, letting them know of their dog's achievement. The notes are a signature flourish of his. Sometimes he writes them in verse; sometimes in French.

"I don't even know if they speak French," he says about one such note. "But everyone knows what tres bien means."

No one comes to dog-walking in a straight line. Indeed, when Fisher, 32, was in high school, it was not even considered a viable career. He earned a [degree in psychology](#) from Loyola College, then managed Donna's restaurant in Charles Village for a few years.

Eventually he ended up with a job at the W.B. Doner ad agency downtown. Like the other office drones, he parked in a garage. He dressed nicely (or nicely enough). He went to lunch. He surfed the Internet when his boss wasn't looking.

But then Doner went under, and Fisher found himself unemployed. He had been working weekends for Walk the Dog Baltimore, a company started by several of his friends. They needed extra help, so he went [full time](#).

Now he spends his days outside, walking up to 22 dogs a day, part of a growing legion of dog walkers who profit from America's obsession with its pets. Fisher says he is happier and more fulfilled now, and that he earns nearly double what he was making at Doner. He charges \$13 for a 30-minute walk.

"Interacting with the dogs is the most satisfying thing," says Fisher, who has one dog of his own, a boxer named Yoda. "They all have different personalities. They have good days and bad days."

He misses the office camaraderie sometimes, and he misses going out to lunch. But he keeps granola bars in his car, and, like all dog walkers, he is on his phone constantly. He recently got a BlackBerry so he could receive and respond to client e-mails during the day. His monthly contract costs \$200.

But, unlike most office jobs, he does not take his work home. "And if you do take it home," he deadpans, "you can scrape it off before you go in the house."

Fisher buys a \$10 roll of quarters for meters each week, as well as a variety of plastic bags. "I carry various sizes and thicknesses depending on the sample I get," he says. "Some dogs are multiple baggers."

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On a recent afternoon, he wore jeans, a green polo shirt, a long-sleeved gray T-shirt and Keen athletic shoes. He has learned to never wear the same shoes two days in a row. And, since he has little hair on his head, partly by choice and partly by genetics, he has also learned to wear a hat nearly every day.

Fisher's territory includes downtown, Mount Vernon and Bolton Hill. Over the years, he has grown so close to some of his clients that he socializes with them. Several even attended his wedding this past spring at - where else? - the Maryland Zoo.

"Matt's part of the family," says Ed Connor of Bolton Hill. After he and his [wife](#), Amy Bastian, had a baby a few years ago, they noticed that their Wheaton terrier, Bree, seemed to feel a little left out. But then Fisher began coming every day at noon, and Bree perked up.

"Bree is a very [smart](#), borderline neurotic dog," Connor says. "Matt has done a lot to accommodate her," including introducing her to other dogs and setting up play dates.

When Fisher enters Connor and Bastian's home, Bree runs to him, tail wagging, and jumps on his leg. He walks Bree a few blocks and picks up Stoney, a brown-and-black Welsh terrier that's just a few months old and summed up in a typically succinct Fisher description: "Big bladder, little dog."

A few more blocks and they collect Ethan, an energetic beige Schnoodle. With the three dogs' leashes wrapped around his hand, Fisher sets off on a walk around the neighborhood. College students stop and pet the dogs ("How cute!") and a letter carrier embraces Bree.

Dog walkers could not survive financially without walking multiple dogs at once. On Tuesdays, Fisher's busiest day, he walks 21 dogs between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. But he is careful to match up dogs that he thinks will get along, and he never walks more than four at the same time.

Most of the dogs he walks are well-trained; their owners wouldn't spend such money on a dog-walker if they didn't really care about their pets. But there are the occasional disasters. Once, a cocker spaniel ate its own poop before Fisher could stop it. Then it threw up on his shoes.

"Luckily," he says, "I wasn't wearing sandals."

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