

by Heather Berry

**Y**oung Fiona pushes her way through the day-care door, ready for a rousing day of play. She runs around the room as quickly as her short legs will carry her, checking out all the toys before settling on a stuffed red bulldog as her first toy.

Fiona grunts happily as she grabs the bulldog by the ear and shakes it quickly to let it know who's boss. Suddenly, the six-month-old realizes she's not the only youngster in the room. Fiona hurries to check out her other buddies — playmates who have four legs, cold noses and wag their tails, too.

"My day care really isn't that different from a human baby day care," says Faye Nowell, owner of South Paw Acres. "About the only difference is that I don't change diapers here."

After years as a recreational therapist and a second career as a graphic artist, Faye, 51, now runs a doggy day care and interactive boarding facility at her home on the west side of Columbia.

Faye's "going to the dogs" happened on a whim. She saw an ad on a bulletin board that caught her eye. "It said, 'Wanted: Day care for dog,'" she recalls.

The ad had been placed by a hairdresser who worked long hours at the Lake of the Ozarks and didn't want her dog to be alone all day.

A dog lover all her life, Faye took the job and found it enjoyable for both she and the dog. Soon, she started taking care of a dog for a friend who traveled frequently. And, after doing her research, Faye realized Columbia might be big enough for a doggy day care. Using an inheritance, Faye decided to open her own day care for dogs.

"On the coasts and in larger cities, doggy day care is huge," says Faye, a member of Boone Electric Cooperative. "I knew I was taking a chance, as this was a first-of-its-kind business in Columbia."

That was a decade ago and the chance paid off. Faye now has a roster of 250 clients who bring their dogs to South Paw Acres for day care or boarding. Day-care rates start at \$25 for a single day and discounts are offered for pre-paid packages, which can bring the cost down to \$20 per day.

Before a dog is admitted to the facility, there is a \$10 non-refundable application interview. Owners and dogs have to make an appointment to visit South Paw Acres and must provide proof that the dog is up-to-date on vaccinations.

"I need to see how their dog reacts to other dogs. If it's very aggressive or seems constantly over-anxious, this probably isn't the place for them," says Faye.

#### Peace of mind for owners

Ray Haight and Jennifer Anderson of Boonville bring their English bulldog pup, Fiona, Monday through Friday for day care while they work in Jefferson City.

"We felt she was too young to be kenneled alone at home all day," says Ray. "This lets her interact with other dogs in a safe, loving environment, and we have peace of mind knowing she's being taken care of while we're at work."

The Haight's former bulldog, Sabre, didn't have the opportunity to attend day care. Ray says he and his wife can tell the interaction with other dogs makes a huge difference.

"We'd be walking along and meet another person with his dog, and Sabre would only be interested in meeting the person, not the other dog," says Ray. "Somewhere along the line, I think he forgot he was a dog."

At South Paw Acres, dogs can come and go as they please from Faye's office through the doggy door that leads to a 1-1/2 acre divided and fenced backyard. While some of the smaller dogs choose to sun and romp in a sideyard, the bigger pooches tend to love the larger section, which also has a pond where many of them seem to enjoy swimming in.

"When I started this business, I thought I'd need to have planned activities for the dogs," says Faye. "I realized pretty quick that while they like it when I play with them, they really just want to play and

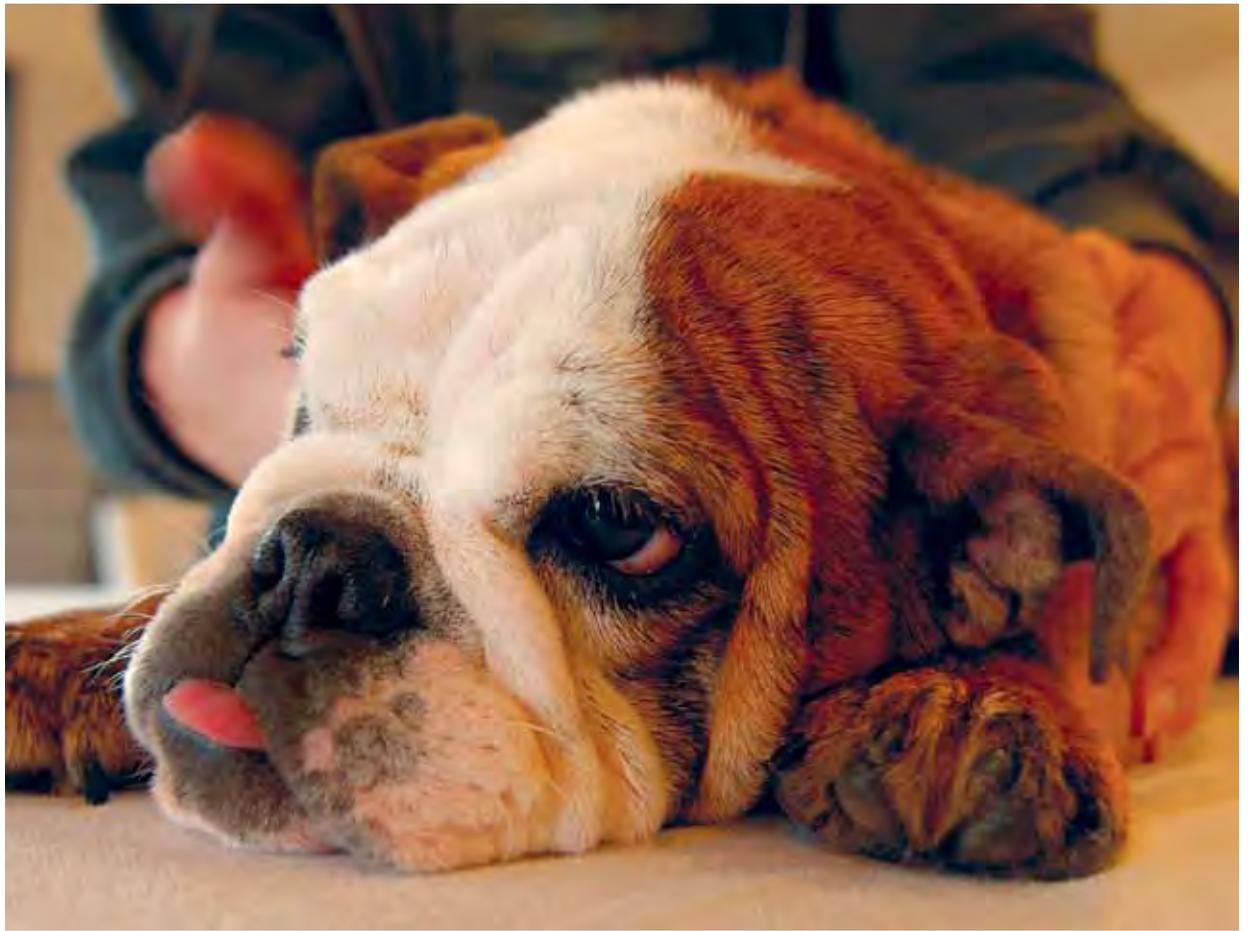


hang out with the other dogs. Here, they're not trying to be human in a human's world, they're just being what they are."

While Faye does play ball, toss sticks, divvy out treats and offer TLC to all the dogs in her care, the pooches pretty much entertain each other. She's there to referee the rare argument between canines and even to help teach the younger pups some things they'll need to know for their stay at South Paw Acres.

"Here Fiona," coaxes Faye through the doggy door to the brindle bulldog pup. "You can come out this way, too. It's OK."

After playing hard all morning, the dogs usually nap outside or in the huge "dog house" Faye has on the property. The 700-square-foot building offers canines a variety of cushy beds to nap on in a climate-controlled room.



Fiona, an English bulldog, enjoys the benefits of a pet massage, something new South Paw Acres offers to its clients.

# Life's gone to the dogs at South Paw Acres

*Popular in big cities and on the coasts, doggy day care and kennel-free boarding is finally catching on in the Midwest*



Students from Alpha Phi Omega's Beta chapter come out periodically to help exercise the dogs at South Paw Acres.

#### Posh services for your pooch

Most of Faye's clients come by word-of-mouth referrals or materials she leaves at local pet stores. A business card Faye picked up at a pet store is how she met Denise McElroy, a canine massage therapist.

Accredited through Equissage, a leading trainer of equine sports and canine massage therapists based in Virginia, Denise is a firm believer in dog therapy.

"This is based on Swedish deep-tissue massage," says Denise. "Just like with people, massage can increase your pet's circulation, level of flexibility and work stiffness out of their muscles. Muscles are muscles, whether on a person or a pet."

Like doggy day cares, pet massage is big on the coasts and in larger cities, according to Denise. A massage for Fido costs \$30 for a half hour and South Paw Acres clients can now book a session for their dogs.

"A lot of people are moving here from much larger cities, and they're used to having these opportunities available to their pets," says Denise.

Another service Faye recently added to South Paw's list is obedience training by Joseph Caputo, a 17-year-veteran canine trainer for the New York City Police Department, who recently moved to central Missouri.

"I think you have a better bond and relationship with your pet after they've had obedience training," says Joseph, a member of Boone Electric Cooperative.

After a decade in business, Faye's happy to say that her doggy day care business is a success.

"It's really caught on," says Faye. "It's fun getting paid to pamper all these dogs. Wish we could all be so lucky!"

*For day care, pet boarding or to arrange for your pet's massage or training sessions, contact Faye at 573-446-2733, via e-mail at [boarding@southpawacres.com](mailto:boarding@southpawacres.com) or at [www.southpawacres.com](http://www.southpawacres.com).*