

## PAMPERED LIKE PEOPLE, OUR POOCHES ARE US

*by Eric Sorensen | photographed  
by Alan Berner*

**C**ONSIDER FOR the next few thousand words that this is a city near the apex of civilization. In almost no other place, in no other time, has a group of people had it so good.

We live long and live well, from cradle to grave, from in vitro fertilization to college, career, cancer care and hospice. Name your technological age — jet, space, digital — and we are major players, building planes, plucking comet dust from space, corralling bits and bytes and knowledge itself. The largest philanthropic trust in the world is discretely humming away on Eastlake Avenue.

And coming along for the ride, smearing up the car windows, tail-swiping our coffee cups, hogging the covers, staining the white berber carpet and licking the face of any kid at tongue level, are dogs.

Dogs come to work. Dogs not only go to the park, they get their own park. They ride on the bus. They have day care, massage, acupuncture, psychologists, psychics, raw food, duck kibble, bakeries, oil paintings and personal photo shoots, SUV beds, sunglasses, jackets of fleece and velvet, several magazines, shirts that say, “I’m with the band,” treats made of lamb lung and the business end of a bull. They have a holiday — Dog-O-Ween — and a fun run. They have an infrastructure of health care, social services and political action. They have a “legislator of the decade” in one Jan Drago, the Seattle City Council member who pioneered the city’s system of dog parks.

“We would hear, ‘A dog is part of my family,’ ‘A dog is my child,’” says Drago. “As I got more and more into this and started seeing publications like Bark magazine, I realized — and this has grown over the past 12 years — almost every service that’s available for humans is available for dogs now. It’s amazing.”

It’s gotten to where one might argue this is the apex of civilization for dogs, too. Just look how far they’ve come from their wolf roots.

Wolves are an endangered species in this country. Only about 150,000 of them are left on the whole planet. Yet nearly that many dogs are in Seattle alone.

Nothing argues like success, and in evolutionary terms,

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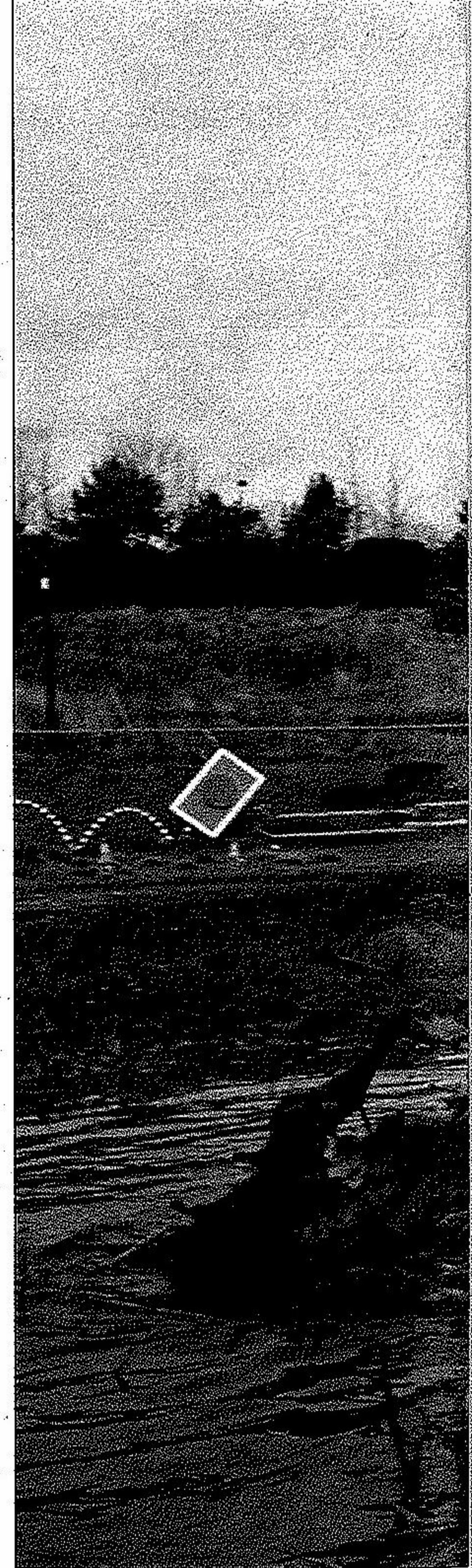
# METRO DOG



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Professional dog walker Auntie M takes Byron, left, and Harry for a half-hour stroll five days a week. She picks up dogs in their apartments and condos and exercises them. Auntie M, whose real name is Marilyn Sierra, says, "Byron is the Tom Jones of the dog world. He loves attention from women (and) is a little Don Juan. Harry is sweet."



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success is measured in such big, solid numbers. In that sense, dogs are ahead of the game in this town. Seattle has more dogs than children. Their species is being perpetuated better than ours.

But let's not mistake this for a competition. For the truly uncanny thing is just how much dogs are part of us and we are part of them. We have co-evolved. They guarded our camps, fended off enemies and helped bring in food; we gave them fire and threw them bones. It's as if we got into each other's genes to where some of our interactions are hardwired. If you must, call it love.

So it should be no surprise that in the great biological road trip of evolution, the dog is often sneaking into the front seat. It's a buddy movie, and our pal has a long nose, bad breath and a gas problem to write home about.

Funny thing is, these buddies of ours are in many ways total strangers. We know precious little of what they think, to the extent they do think, and when we guess, we're often wrong.

Which brings up some of the other shortcomings of this relationship. There's what you might expect: chewed slippers and other property damage, and 1,616 documented bites in the past five years. Also, the outsized clout of dogs suggests Seattle might not be doing quite so well by its children. Seattle residents' growing dependence on dogs implies they might not be getting enough emotional support from their fellow humans. Maybe they aren't rising to the challenges of compromise, frustration and general woes of dealing with other people, whom Sartre did, after all, call hell.

And maybe this is a variation on the bromide about Seattle's social life: polite, but not friendly.

It's lonely at the top, so we bring the dog.

**JUST KEEP TELLING** yourself: These are animals, non-human animals. They are off in their own orbit, with occasional, fleeting intersections into ours. Space aliens with fur.

They are masters of espionage,

donning the human garb of love and compassion to infiltrate our homes, befriend our children, eat our food, get presents for Christmas and Hanukkah, and share our beds.

Enron investors say they've lost \$25 billion in the utility's fraud scandal. Every year, U.S. dogs cost more than that in vet bills alone.

The emperor has a tail.

They've fooled us, or we've fooled ourselves, into thinking they are something else. But they are animals, nearly mute, largely unthinking, amoral.

We can examine the magnitude of this scandal later, but first let's just try to get a handle on the nature of this dog character, this black box with smelly ears.

"What I love about dogs is they're not like people," says Jon Katz, a prolific author ("Katz on Dogs," "The New Work of Dogs") and self-made dog expert who challenges many of our assumptions about what dogs do.

Dogs, says Katz, have a basic set of desires aimed at their natural life of running free, having sex, bark-

ing, marking things and challenging other dogs. They have taste buds and like food. They have a narrow range of emotions: happy, excited, curious, frightened. Love and loyalty may not be in the equation.

Katz once told a trainer his dog was so loyal he would never be able to adjust to a new owner.

"The trainer laughed," Katz writes, "and said that given two pounds of beef liver and a couple of days, my dog would forget that I ever walked the earth."





Heaven-on-earth for Lola is simply a mud puddle at Blue Dog Pond off-leash area (on Martin Luther King Jr. Way South and South Massachusetts), one of 11 in the city.

Separation anxiety, which often has owners thinking the dog is barking and chewing to get even for being abandoned, is largely a case of being bored or lacking the resources to spend time alone.

In the dog world, being alone is bad.

Which is where people come in. Dogs are social, a trait they share with an animal elite that includes orcas, crows and humans. They like to negotiate relationships in a hierarchy. They

may aspire to be top dog, but if cut off by a snarl, they will accept a lesser role. They're just glad to be part of this great organization.

"If you're a wolf and you're on your own," says Jim Ha, "you're dead."

Ha is a professor in the University of Washington psychology department. More to the point, he's the only certified animal behaviorist between Madison, Wis., and Los Angeles. He can't talk to the animals, but he can pick up a lot by watching dogs talk to each

other, which he did recently in the off-leash area at Magnuson Park.

To a first-time visitor, the park is a free-for-all of running, barking, smelling, ball-chasing, crapping, and shouting, by humans, whom the dogs mostly ignore. But this is actually a very ordered environment, brokered in the argot of a dog body language that has some 45 different gestures.

Perked ears, things are going well. Hip checks say, "Back off, I'm in charge." At the beach along Lake

Washington, a small black dog keeps dropping a ball at its owner's feet and staring up for the next toss. "It's almost avoiding other dogs," says Ha. "And that's been bred into some of these breeds. Some of it is learning. It's how strong the bond is. I like to see it in general because it shows me that there's a really strong bond between the dog and the owner. And that's what you need to have safety, have control."

Throughout Magnuson, the mean-  
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ing of most dog gestures is lost on the humans. The words of most humans are lost on the dogs. It's a perpetual re-enactment of the Far Side cartoon in which the dog only hears, "blah blah Ginger blah blah blah blah."

Usually it's innocuous, like the woman a few months back who kept saying, "Make good choices honey," only to watch her dog run off. Then there's the small Japanese hunting dog that Ha and I see picking fights in front of its oblivious owner.

"I had a case of one of those," says Ha. "It ate a cat. In front of the owner, on a leash."

The failure of humans and dogs to understand each other, says Ha, creates the bulk of behavior problems he is asked to fix. "The owners do not think about the world the way the dogs think about the world," he says, "and they are rewarding, purely inadvertently, the very behavior that they don't like in almost every case."

But somewhere in the course of our evolutions, going back 100,000 years or so, the social habits of the dog family have fallen in sync with the humans. We shouted and gestured directions at each other and absorbed just enough to learn we could get along.

Patricia McConnell, Ha's Wisconsin-based fellow behaviorist and author of "The Other End of the Leash," says we're hardwired to read the emotions in other creatures and make decisions on the basis of those emotions.

"And my thesis is one of the reasons we get along with dogs so well is that we both have these plastic Jim Carrey-like faces that are profoundly expressive, so our relationship is smooth," she says. "It's facilitated by the fact that we innately are able, at least to some extent, to read an expression of joy or fear or anything else on a dog's face, more so than we can on the faces of any other animals."

And in that look lies the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

A FEW YEARS ago Brandie Ahlgren got a boxer. She dropped \$25 on her first trip to the pet store, then saw she was spending \$50 every couple weeks on toys and food. She noticed the Next to Nature pet store was knocking out a wall and expanding.

She started talking with people

at the Westcrest off-leash area and noticed a certain expression in their faces.

"I just got that sense of the joy the dog brings to their lives," she says.

It all added up to so much market research for CityDog, a quarterly magazine built around Northwest dogs and published in Seattle.

"It wasn't about just the numbers of dogs in the area," Ahlgren says. "It was about the attitudes to dogs in the area."

There are about 125,000 dogs in Seattle, going by both the Seattle Animal Shelter's estimate and an independent analysis by The Seattle Times.

In the 2000 census, there were fewer than 90,000 children in Seattle.

This says more about the number of children in Seattle, which has fewer households with children than any other large city besides San Francisco. There are a lot of students and other young

people here, plus childless professionals putting in long hours, and a sizable gay and lesbian population. Houses are either too small or too expensive for most families with children. The dog numbers are actually pretty average. One in three households has a dog.

That alone is significant: Seattle is riding a national surge in dog numbers, from about 15 million in the 1960s to 70 million today.

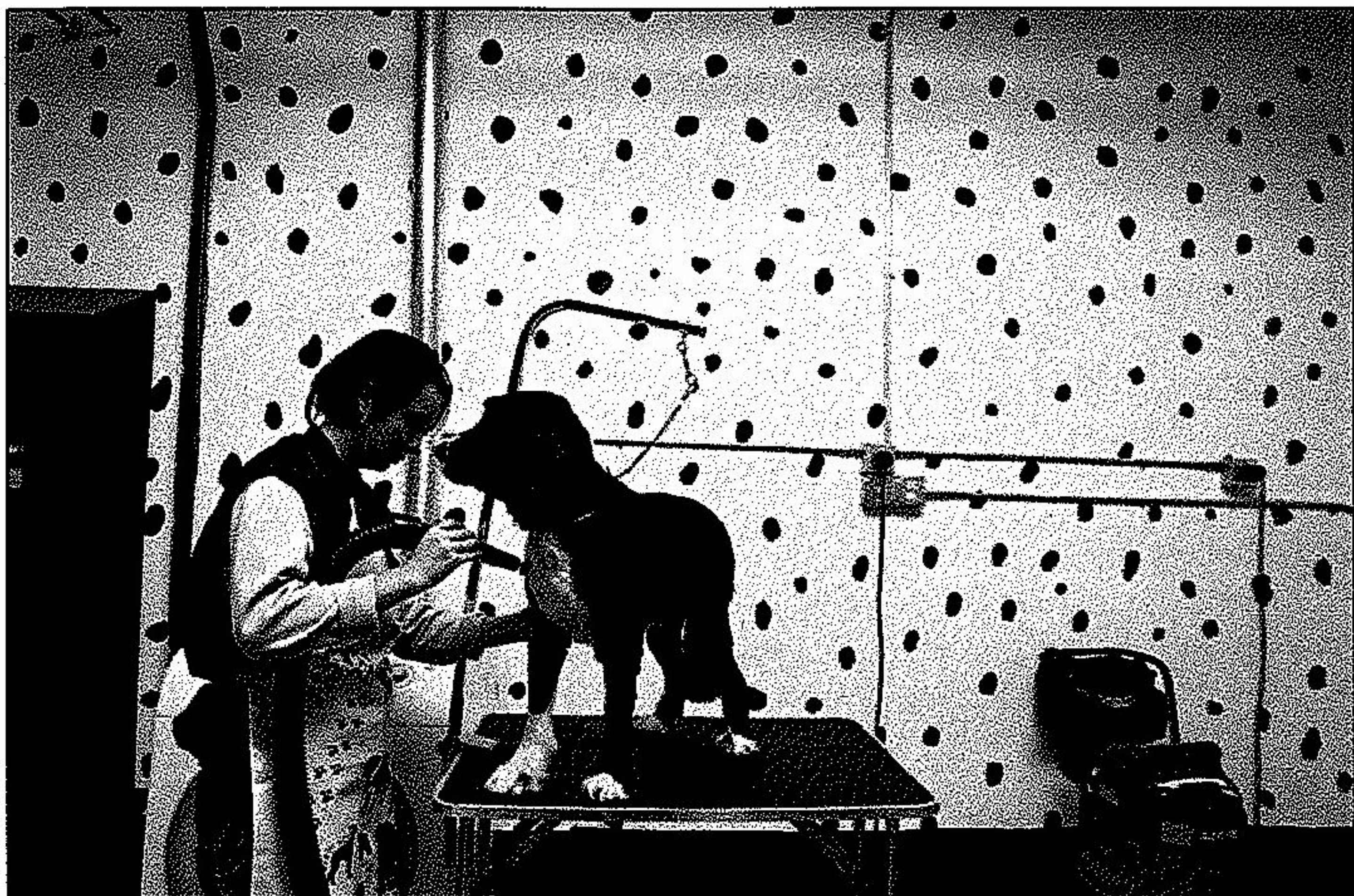
What's more remarkable is the attitude of which Ahlgren speaks,

*Looking a bit like Zsa Zsa, Rys Kallista's Kandance of Aery's, gets ready for two minutes of competition at the Seattle Kennel Club's annual show. It takes two hours of grooming to get the miniature poodle from Olympia ready.*





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*Backed by a dalmatian wall, Jack gets the full-spa treatment with a blow dry from Barbara Kiss at the Downtown Dog Lounge.*

the passion with which the city has embraced the dog. *Dogfriendly.com*, a Web site and publisher of guides for people who travel with their dogs, ranks Seattle as the fifth-most dog-friendly city in North America.

The city has 11 off-leash areas, a huge leap since the first four were made permanent in 1997. There are some 35 dog day-care centers taking care of five to 10 dogs at a time or, in the case of the Downtown Dog Lounge, upward of 60. The "U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographic Sourcebook" is hot reading at the Central Library's reference section as more people like Ahlgren ponder a dive into the dog business.

In some ways, it's a growth industry for people seeking a second career, people such as Elise Vincentini, who was traveling around the country for a seafood company when her first Weimaraner, Lily, got her thinking she would like a job where she

could spend time with her dog. She also noticed about 20 dogs in Belltown over the course of a day.

"I realized I'm not the only one obsessed with my dog," she says. "There are a lot of people here whose dog is No. 1."

So she created the Downtown Dog Lounge, bringing the world of high-end marketing to the kibble crowd. Starting at 7 a.m. each weekday, she fields a parade of showered-and-dressed professionals dropping off their dogs for a day of custom meals, filtered water, organic snacks and chaperoned milling. Pheromones are automatically misted in the tranquility room. Older dogs seeking couch time kick back in Barkley's Lounge. Owners look in on their dogs via webcam.

By 8:30, there are 80 dogs checked in for as much as \$28 a day. Vincentini hasn't advertised in a year.

It's a far cry from when her childhood dog ate Alpo and

spent the day in the backyard. But the dogs almost certainly prefer it, and it is clearly striking a chord in their owners.

"People love their dogs," says Sheila Wells, a massage therapist who treats dogs in an indoor pool behind her West Seattle home. "Their dogs are their children. They'll do anything for their dogs. They're just kids with fur. We call them 'fur kids.'"

Some people find this troubling.

"THERE ARE A LOT of dogs that get treated better than a lot of kids in Seattle," says Jim Dier, former director of Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods and a self-described "community builder."

On the day we spoke, Dier counted 38 dog-training places in the phone book. "And meanwhile we're closing schools in Seattle."

Jon Katz, the author, worries that the emotions people bring to dogs have

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*Lily, an 11-year-old black lab with a hip replacement, gets massage therapy from Sheila Wells at WellSprings in West Seattle. Sheila is a licensed animal-massage practitioner. She works in a heated pool of 20,000 gallons of water.*

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become more intense as people become more socially isolated, be it through divorce, the decline in extended families, increased mobility, or time given over to television and the Internet.

"Americans have a tough time connecting with people these days," he says. In the process, he worries, we aren't letting dogs be dogs.

It's ironic. Here we are, civilized as all get out, and we're knocking ourselves out for a coarse, unsophisticated animal.

You can get lots of reasons for why this might be, the top one being something like companionship.

"They frankly are a lot more genuine than a lot of people are," says Elizabeth Bacher, an account executive for Northwest Cable News who lives in Fremont with Babe, a golden retriever, and Blue, a labradoodle. "They're always glad to see you. Their

emotions are much more basic and pure. Nobody's putting anyone on."

People may also be getting dogs because they can. Households with dogs bring in an average of nearly \$69,000 a year, \$20,000 more than the Seattle average.

When the going gets good, you get a dog. Of course, you could swap out the dog for other things, like a cabin on Lake Chelan. But this is more personal and driven. Like ancient Egyptians worshipping cats, we're looking to dogs in a way that vibrates with our emotional core. It's as if we've taken care of our survival and safety and now the dog helps with the other business of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy, our emotions and esteem, or our spiritual needs.

It's as if the dog is a blank slate on which we write our desires and see them answered.

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"It's a heart connection," says Susan McAliley, a Seattle artist who started making custom dog oil paintings in a lull between contributions to the American Girl brand. "It's just a deep feeling in your soul, your heart, with this animal."

It could be we're in love with nature itself, what biologist E.O. Wilson calls "biophilia." Dogs let us live with something that candidly operates on instinct, throbbing to an ancient genetic machinery built around loping after prey and nuzzling members of the pack.

"People who live in the suburb or the city have very little connection with all of the rest of life around us," says McConnell, the behaviorist. "That can be very isolating. Dogs give us the feeling that we are not so alone. We are part of something bigger than just us, and that's good."

Every other year, the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association polls people on the pros and cons of dog ownership. On the plus side, owners have said they thought of the dog as a companion (97 percent), a family member (74 percent) and a way to stay healthy and live longer (59 percent).

The minus side had the usual laundry list of dog woes: attacking strangers, begging, stealing food, shedding, ticks and fleas, damaged furniture, expensive food and medicine, and drooling. But of all their drawbacks, the worst was the most natural thing of all, the one thing you can expect from animals with complete surety: they die, and it's sad when they do. (P)

*Former Seattle Times reporter Eric Sorensen is training a lab-mix, Lily, from the Progressive Animal Welfare Society in Lynnwood. Alan Berner is a Seattle Times staff photographer. Seattle Times researcher Gene Balk contributed to this story.*