

Helping pets be the best they can be

By Cathy Hollander

A dog barks all day long or jumps on people when they come to visit and neighbors wonder, why doesn't that owner do something about it? Sycamore Township resident Lisa Desatnik has turned that question into a business with a positive twist.

"What do you want your pet to do instead?" asks Desatnik, owner of So Much PETential, a pet training business for dogs and parrots. She has been studying positive behavior management and applied behavior analysis for more than 12 years.

Her goal is to replace unwanted behavior with other behaviors that her clients prefer. She looks at it from the pet's point of view and tries to make the new behavior more fun for the pet. Sometimes she teaches the pet owner a new approach or reaction that reinforces the desired behavior.

Scheduling one-on-one meetings with individuals or the whole family in their home or other locations, Desatnik teaches strategies to help them have success. She also offers consultations over the telephone.

In these sessions, Desatnik addresses dog training behaviors such as coming when called and loose leash walking. She works with people to teach their pets better impulse control, not to jump on people or bark. Dogs need to be rewarded for checking in with their owner, which Desatnik calls focusing. She also offers potty training tips for dogs.

In parrots, she can address behaviors such as screaming, biting, or destroying furniture.

Enriching the environment is one of the answers to training a better animal and she gives her clients ideas how to do that. Desatnik embraces a philosophy of positive reinforcement. Instead of focusing on what the dog or parrot is doing wrong, she teaches alternative behaviors.

Desatnik was the child in the neighborhood that brought home turtles, rabbits and even a raccoon. She has raised dogs her whole life. It was when she started to train her third bird, that she began to try out strategies to change the negative pet behaviors. She learned about the science of reinforcing behavior and started to think about what was going on. She asked herself how this negative behavior was being rewarded and what desired behavior would be incompatible with it. Then, she created ways to reinforce the new behavior.

"I began studying animal behavior when my then young African Grey, Barnaby, decided he really liked to imitate my other birds' screams," said Desatnik. "Learning how to modify his behavior so that I could share my home with an enthusiastic talker instead of a constant screamer, using only positive reinforcement strategies, is what convinced me this is the way to train pets so that they can succeed in homes. It is how I train our dog, Sam, and how I teach others to train their pets."

She started out by helping friends with their pets. Excited about the prospect of educating people about pet behavior, she expanded her training services into a business. She is passionate about strengthening the relationships between pets and their owners and looking at behaviors in a different way.

Her studies have taken her to several workshops from trainer Barbara Heidenreich and to "The Five Minute Recall" course from world agility champion dog trainer Susan Garrett who has a co-operative approach to dog training.

Lisa Desatnik with her pet birds



Sam adheres to the dog's code of run, romp and play every day.



Lisa with her pal, Sam

An excerpt from Desatnik's blog:

Life Lessons Learned From Sam (Sam is her dog)

- When loved ones and visitors come to your home, always run with enthusiasm to greet them.
- Give of yourself freely to others just because you can.
- Thrive on the joy of just being together, of getting and giving attention.
- Remember to let everyone know they are important and practice loyalty every day.
- When someone you care about is happy, celebrate too.
- When someone you care about is having a bad day, know that just nuzzling close may be all that is needed.
- Don't waste time being angry or sad, life is way too short for that.
- Don't fret about the little stuff, be joyous that this is a new day and a new moment.
- Run, romp, and play every day.
- Show your happiness by wagging your whole body.
- Pay attention to everything meaningful.
- Take time to sit on a rock and just watch the world around you.
- Lay in the grass and savor the scents carried through the fresh air crossing your face.
- Delight in the joy of a long walk with your favorite person.
- Never ever pass up an opportunity to go for a ride in the car.
- And don't ever try to be anyone but yourself...just be the very best you can be.

She attended Dr. Susan Friedman's online "Living and Learning with Parrots" course and "The Art and Science of Training Companion Parrots" workshop from Orlando-based Natural Encounters. Recently, Desatnik went to the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (APDT) Conference and is an associate member of the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators as well as a supporting member of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. She is a member of Doggone Safe and will be offering educational programs for children on safety with dogs in 2013.

"The big thing is that we all have within us the ability for success," said Desatnik. "I want to teach people how to build success. Animals love to learn and to figure out what they need to do."

Desatnik challenges pet owners to hold themselves up to creating an environment that fosters a love of learning in animals. For more information, please visit <http://www.SoMuchPETential.com> or call 262-4062. Lisa Desatnik has been writing a column about pet behavior for more than eight years. She also has a blog.