

House and Pet

By Jennifer Bell

The Intelligencer

Housesitting is one thing, taking a pet alligator out for walks is another.

It was just one of Karen Brooks' more memorable moments.

As a housesitter, Brooks was hired to watch the house and feed the pet: a small alligator.

"I had to feed it live fish, but I made sure I didn't get too close," Brooks chuckled. "And I definitely wasn't taking it for a walk."

Exercising pets, collecting mail, shovelling snow from sidewalks: it's all in a day's work for Brooks, as owner-operator of House and Pet.

The Belleville woman has made a career out of looking after other people's houses since 1991.

Vacationers hire her to perform 24 or 48-hour checks on their properties; ensuring mail and newspapers are brought inside; that lights are switched on and off in different rooms, and monitoring heating systems and water pipes.

"Basically I make the homes look lived in, while the owners are away," explained Brooks.

She also enjoys what she terms the "bonus" part of the job: caring for animals.

"It's really much better for cats and dogs to stay in their own environment," Brooks says. "I come in anywhere from four times a day (for dogs) to once every other day (for cats), depending on the level of care and companionship they need."

Brooks, who registered her home-based business in the summer of 1991,

started out small. She put an ad in the newspaper and hand-delivered flyers around the neighborhood. Slowly, she built up a regular clientele by establishing reliability and trustworthiness.

Today, she covers an area west to Montrose Road, east to Elmwood Drive, north to County Road 5 (in Sidney Township) and south to the border of Hastings and Prince Edward counties.

Prices — which Brooks says are "reasonable" — are based on distance travelled.

Bonded by her insurance company, Brooks also makes sure her customers know the requirements of their own home insurance.

"Most policies have a clause stating the frequency of security checks, so that if anything happened, they have to show that the home was monitored while they were away," she explained.

Meeting requirements of householders' insurance policies not only prevents mishaps such as burst water pipes or flooding, it helps thwart burglaries, says Kathryn Morrison of The Housesitters.

Director of the company's consumer affairs department, Morrison says The Housesitters — a Canada-wide organization — specializes in both residential and corporate services.

Each of its 14 locations is independently owned and operated. In Belleville, customers call a local number and are connected to the Toronto office, which then contacts its employees in Quinte to provide services.

The Housesitters — fully bonded and insured — will look after homes, pets,

plants, lawn maintenance and snow removal, collect mail and newspapers. If the client requests it, they'll even have someone live in the home while the owners are away.

The company has approximately 100 regular customers in the Belleville

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area since establishing a presence nine years ago, says Morrison.

The majority of its employees are retired people, she says, adding "this is an ideal career for a person or couple with spare time."

Christmas is a "frantically busy" time for housesitting services, says Morrison.

Ditto for Brooks of House and Pet. She's actually had to turn clients away over the Christmas holiday "because I didn't want to spread myself too thin."

Summer is also a peak time for Brooks, who is often assisted by husband Art.

"Basically, we provide home and pet care when people need it."

Vacations for the couple are "squeezed in" during the least busy periods, Brooks said.

"We definitely don't travel at holiday time."

And who looks after their house and pet when they're away?

"The neighbors, of course."

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