

DOG MASSAGE BY HOPE

A hands-on approach benefits dogs, owners

A West Park people massage therapist is also offering services to ill, injured or pampered pooches.

BY EILEEN SOLER

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Licensed massage therapist Hope LaMonica has taken a lucrative hands-on people business and let it go to the dogs.

"It was time," said the West Park resident and pet parent of three cuddly canines.

LaMonica, 31, became aware of the benefits of pet massage through her veterinarian while helping another of her dogs, a collie named Bear, suffer through painful arthritis. Bear eventually died.

Earlier this year, a television program inspired LaMonica. It was about a certified California pet massage therapist who helps crippled dogs heal faster and better.

"I saw her take dogs in little doggie wheelchairs, those who were paralyzed or suffering seizures, and through muscle memory techniques she was getting them to walk again," said LaMonica, 31.

She was trained at the Florida College of Natural Health and gained experience at some of South Florida's hottest people spas, including the Wyndham Resort in Weston and the Westin Diplomat Resort & Spa in Hollywood. LaMonica earned additional certification at Ohio's Pet Massage Institute in June.

"Now I massage people or their pets at their own homes," LaMonica said.

Prices for pets are \$45 for 30 minutes, during which LaMonica will teach the pet owner basic techniques. People massages cost \$75 an hour.

Erica Rodriguez, one of LaMonica's longtime two-legged clients, said she is grateful for the new business, called Dog Massage by Hope.

"At my house, with three dogs, I get to see three aspects of how important pet massage is," said Rodriguez, who lives in Miami Shores.

Rodriguez, who enjoys "massage for massage's sake," said the service is pure fun for her 7-month-old Neapolitan mastiff puppy, calms her hyperactive 5-year-old terrier mix, and eases pain while increasing range of motion for her 8-year-old Rottweiler, who suffers from hip problems.

LaMonica said dogs of all sizes, ages and breeds can benefit. She recommends three sessions per week for pets with physical problems and once a week for pampered pooches.

"Some people say, 'I pet my dog, so why does it need massage, too?' " LaMonica said.

Younger pets become familiar with being touched, which makes grooming and veterinarian visits more pleasant. It also eases discomfort during growth spurts, she said.

For middle age or older pets, massage helps reveal suspicious changes in skin, muscles or bones that could indicate more serious problems. If a dog has health issues, massage helps improve disposition, increase circulation, relieve pain and increase body motion.

Susan Benjamin, hospital manager at VCA Sterling Square Animal Hospital in Broward near Hollywood, called pet massage an "up-and-coming field."

"Some pet groomers offer basic massage. But trained, certified and licensed providers are rare in South Florida," Benjamin said.

Veterinarians and pet surgeons generally show owners basic massage procedures as needed before their injured pets or those who undergo surgery are sent home.

LaMonica will be the first to provide professional massage services at VCA Sterling Square hospital, 2871 Stirling Rd., every Friday. "We're very excited," Benjamin said.

LaMonica, who volunteers at the Humane Society of Broward County weekly for the shelter's Pet Attention & Love pet cuddle program, said massage can be rewarding for both pets and their humans.

"Today's dog owners spend thousands of dollars on jeweled collars, expensive carriers and even doggie day care," she said. "Massage is another way to show your dogs how much you love them."

For information about Dog Massage by Hope, call 954-253-7800 or visit www.floridadogmassage.com.