

# Special K9 jobs

2 Long Islanders find niche second careers working with dogs



Michael Schaier works with Charlie, a Great Dane who is part of the Dellibovi family, during a weekly at-home training session in Albertson earlier this month. Schaier owned a real estate business before selling it and starting Michael's Pack, a dog-training facility in Mineola. ■ Video and more photos at [newsday.com/lillife](http://newsday.com/lillife)

BY CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN  
Special to Newsday

**W**hen Rosanne Sharkey was having behavioral issues with her rambunctious puppy, Oreo, she went to a former real estate broker for help. "He was constantly mouthing me," said Sharkey, who lives in Franklin Square. "Puppy teeth are like little razors, and several times I thought I needed stitches."

It turns out that what she needed was someone to teach her young border collie mix the basics of obedience. She found her answer in Michael Schaier, Oreo's trainer and founder of Michael's Pack in Mineola. "I had always trained dogs, for other people and for myself, since I was a kid," said Schaier, 61, of Freeport, who six years ago gave up his real estate business to train dogs full time. "I love this. I should have done it 30 years ago!"

Schaier is a "dogpreneur," just like fellow Long Islander and self-professed "animal freak" Randy Handwerger, 46, who lives on the South Fork. From 1992 until 2006, she was a commercial pet photographer and was content with her career. The work required shooting, editing and marketing her images to greeting-card companies, calendar manufacturers and the like. But in 2005, health problems

with her beloved Shiloh shepherd, Sylvester, laid the foundation for what would eventually become Handwerger's new venture — S.S. Aqua Dog, a rehabilitative hydrotherapy program for ailing dogs that is based in East Hampton.

Sylvester, a rare breed who at the time was 9 years old, was once an active 115-pound dog and Handwerger's constant companion before he began having health problems.

"It started with him dragging a foot, then dragging a leg, then both legs," she said. Pretty soon, Sylvester could hardly walk and his prognosis was grim — degenerative myelopathy, a progressive and incurable disease of the spinal cord. Desperate to help Sylvester, Handwerger delved into online research for treatment approaches, becoming a self-taught expert in hydrotherapy.

"I created a workout schedule, and by swimming, he was able to regain what he'd lost in a short amount of time," she said, adding that because of the hydrotherapy, her best friend's quality of life not only improved but was extended. Veterinarians had given Sylvester no more than six months to live, but he survived more than a year before dying on Aug. 30, 2006.

When Handwerger realized there were other sick dogs that might benefit from her work with Sylvester, she put away her cameras, and S.S. Aqua Dog was born.

#### Pool helps hounds heal

Hydrotherapy for pets is a relatively new treatment option. Typically, practices such as Long Island Veterinary Specialists in Plainview use underwater treadmills submerged in a tank or container of water for physical therapy. Handwerger takes the concept deeper by getting into the water with her canine clients. She has a warm-water swim spa in her backyard, but mostly makes aqua calls on the East End for pet owners with in-



**ON THE COVER** Randy Handwerger of S.S. Aqua Dog supports Fergus, a 10-year-old mixed breed, during a hydrotherapy treatment.



Handwerger, owner of S.S. Aqua Dog in East Hampton, conducts a hydrotherapy session with Fergus, who is recovering from elbow surgery and a broken toe, said his owner, Terry Kempen.



See COVER STORY on G8



Oliver Squirt, an 11-month-old terrier, has been trained to sit in his bed on command.

#### Training tips for happy, good dogs

Getting a puppy? Michael Schaier of Michael's Pack offers some basic training dos and don'ts:

#### DO

**1. Set boundaries.** Puppies do great with black and white. They do not do great with gray areas. For example, your puppy is sometimes allowed to jump on people.

**2. Set up a containment system when you're not home.** This prevents your puppy from potentially damaging your house and getting hurt by eating something dangerous.

**3. Exercise the puppy.** Excess puppy energy leads to all types of unwanted behavior, such as nipping, biting, chewing and jumping.

#### DON'T

**1. Yell at your puppy if it has an "accident" in the house.** It teaches other than to hide the next time they have to go.

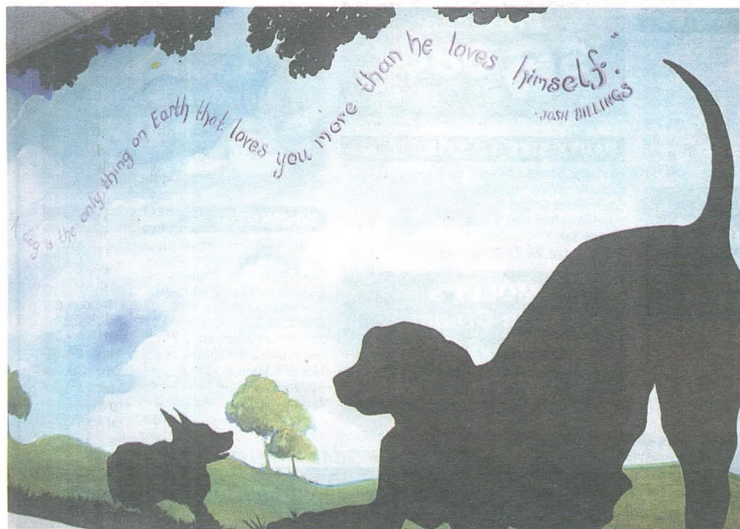
**2. Assume that your puppy will listen to you with the same degree of attention as it gets older.** A 10-week-old puppy will follow you around as you walk through the house. A 16-week-old puppy would rather sniff and chew things than come when called. As a puppy's confidence grows, so does its curiosity.

— CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN





Dog trainer Michael Schaier works with Kaitlyn Alvares of Mineola and her 9-month-old puppy, Solo, during an intermediate group class last month at Michael's Pack.



A hand-painted mural adorns the wall at Michael's Pack, Schaier's dog-training center in Mineola.

# Pet project, dream jobs

COVER STORY from G4

door or heated outdoor pools. She is certified in pet CPR and first aid, and is certified for canine therapeutic massage from the Rocky Mountain School of Animal Acupressure Massage in Carbondale, Colo.

Handwerger has a sliding scale of prices for clients in need, but she charges \$85 for a one-on-one swim session or \$800 for a group of 10 sessions held at S.S. Aqua Dog. Sessions held in clients' pools vary depending on location, but start at \$100 for residents in East Hampton/Montauk/Wainscott and go

up to \$150 for those in Water Mill and Southampton. Massages range from \$45 a session to \$700 for a package of 20.

Handwerger customizes her clients' water therapy to their particular health issues. Two years ago, Nikki Wood's yellow Labrador retriever, Shelly, 11, was suffering from an increasing number of health issues: calcification of her joints, severe osteoarthritis and ACL tears. Even with medication, Wood said, Shelly was in extreme pain and had reached a point where she could barely walk.

"We tried stem cell treatment



Handwerger massages Splash, her 5-year-old Shiloh shepherd who has anxiety issues. Massages range from \$45 a session to \$700 for a package of 20. After a recent session, Splash is more relaxed.



for her; you name it, we did it," but nothing seemed to help her recover, said Wood, who lives in Amagansett. That is, until S.S. Aqua Dog was called in.

Shelly had a series of twice-weekly sessions, which Handwerger said were designed to give her comfort and ease her pain via non-weight-bearing exercises.

"I have dogs swim with me or retrieve items, or swim against resistance or in patterns, or any and all of the above," Handwerger said.

Shelly enjoyed her sessions, but she died in February of kidney failure. Though still

mourning her loss, Wood said Handwerger is "a healer."

Handwerger often is referred by clients and by local veterinarians, such as Dr. Barry Browning of Sag Harbor Veterinary Clinic, a proponent of hydrotherapy for dogs, which he said is becoming increasingly popular post-surgery or as an alternative to going under the knife in certain cases. As with humans, exercising dogs in water decreases pressure on sore joints while stimulating and building up muscle mass, Browning said.

Handwerger said that working with other dogs was a cathartic way for her to cope

with the loss of Sylvester. It provided a distraction from the grief but also offered her a way to nurture and be close to other animals, and in turn help them with their ailments. Since losing Sylvester, she has added to her family of animals, which now includes Splash, 5, also a Shiloh shepherd, and Snag, 15, a silver Maine coon cat.

### 'I get to do what I love'

Schaier has two dogs of his own, bulldog Rosalita, 10, and Clarence, 9, a Great Dane. They are perfectly behaved pets — after all, they have to set examples of Schaier's skills

as a trainer.

Like Handwerger, Schaier makes house calls. In fact, he said a dog's home is an ideal place for training, because that's where the problems often occur, and they need to learn who is the master of their domain.

That was part of the lesson plan for Sharkey and Oreo, who is almost 9 months old. Sharkey and her husband, John, adopted Oreo in September from North Shore Animal League America in Port Washington. Not only did he nip at them, as puppies are wont to do, but he had an extremely high energy level, she said.

"He'd go crazy in the evening, jumping from chair to chair; there was no containing him," Sharkey recalled. "I was getting frightened that he was going to be more than I could handle."

Oreo's issues weren't confined to the indoors. "We'd take him for walks, and he'd pull me," said Sharkey, who has a bad leg as a result of a car accident.

But it was during one of those stressful walks that she ran into a well-behaved border collie and his owner, who passed along a phone number for Michael's Pack.

Before Schaier got into the dog business full-time, he "specialized in sales and marketing of multiunit residential properties, like co-ops and condos," he said. "I did real

estate for many years, but I never really liked it. . . . I was good at it but I wanted more — something that meant more to me than buying and selling property."

To fill that void, Schaier trained puppies on the side in group classes at a local Petco. "I really enjoyed doing it, but at that point I never thought there was a career to be had in dog training," he said.

Then one day a pet owner asked whether Schaier would make a house-training house call, and a lightbulb went off in his head.

Eventually, with a growing list of private clients, he got his wife Jessica's blessing to live his dream. "She gave me encouragement and said, 'Go ahead, if that's what you really want to do, pursue it.'"

After selling the real estate business, Schaier earned credentials from the international Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers. He uses positive reinforcement training techniques — praise or a treat, a belly rub, a pat on the head or a toy when the dog responds well to a command.

Based on bookings, his methods seem to work.

"I see, on average, 25 to 30 clients a week and now have two trainers working for me," Schaier said.

Schaier's prices vary, depending on where the training is done and whether the lessons are conducted by him or his trainers. Five classes at his Mineola center cost \$250. For in-home training with Schaier, five one-hour sessions cost \$1,350 or \$750 with one of his trainers. He charges \$100 for a home evaluation, which is free if the client signs up for sessions.

In addition to house calls, Schaier's Mineola facility serves as a training center and offers group puppy classes and organized play dates in a safe, contained environment.

Sharkey has taken a now-obedient Oreo to play there. It took an evaluation and five one-hour classes to teach Oreo to respond to one-word commands (sit, stay, down) and corresponding hand signals, and to heel when walking. She said she is thrilled with Oreo's progress, as is his trainer, who said his only regret is he didn't launch his business sooner.

"I have four grown children and always preach to them to follow their passion." Schaier said, even if it involves long hours. Nowadays, he said, "I come home sometimes at 8:30, 9 and I'm tired, but I get to do what I love — work with dogs. It's the best."