



The Grateful Dog DIY Dog Washing: a Tail-wagging Idea

by Jane Schaller

Kristen Ellis gazes lovingly at her Rottweiler-hound mix, Cowboy, as he settles into his dog bed beneath the reception desk at The Grateful Dog, Kristen's do-it-yourself dog washing business in Hyannis.

"I have always been a dog lover. For as long as I can remember, I was just fascinated by them," Kristen reflects. "We didn't have a dog growing up due to my father's allergies," she adds, rolling her eyes.

Kristen's angst over such dubious pet-free excuses turned to hope when her grandmother suggested volunteering at the MSPCA. Regrettably, volunteers need to be at least 18 years old but sensing her yearning, the shelter agreed to let her have regular "playtime" visits.

Riding her bike to the shelter daily through all kinds of weather brought a newfound purpose to her young world. "I became un-officially the first volunteer under the age of 18," she says proudly. "I was 12." So began Kristen's lifelong vocational journey with faithful dogs at her side.

After high school, she landed a job tending animals at the Veterinary Associates of Cape Cod but soon had to give notice in order to focus on her growing pet-sitting operation. "I was working seven days a week and walking about ten miles Monday through Friday," she explains. "I was so busy, I didn't advertise because I couldn't take any more dogs on."

Despite the success of her business, Kristen longed to expand its breadth in a way that would bring freshness and long-term stability. Such an opportunity arose when a Colorado friend raved about do-it-yourself dog-washing places in his western city.

Intrigued by the concept, Kristen investigated further while visiting her brother in California. "It seemed like every shopping plaza had one," she raved. "They were fantastic!"

After obtaining loans from family and friends, Kristen found space in Hyannis. In 2006, **The Grateful Dog** opened its doors to the public, becoming the first self-help dog wash on the Cape.

"The business had a slow start," she acknowledges. "It felt like we had to really build it from the ground up."

What had become instant successes in more urban areas, where tight living spaces impeded dog maintenance, required a more intensified community education effort on the Cape.

In addition to making use of Facebook, Twitter and Craigslist, Kristen has adopted homegrown methods to get the word out.

"We put up flyers at doggie hot spots. My father even hands out cards to people walking their dogs when he passes them on his daily bike ride," she says. "I've set up a table at the dog park in Brewster and handed out coffee and provided people with my literature."

The facility has four private stations equipped with stainless steel waist-high tubs, non-heat dryers, temperature-controlled water, massage brushes, nail trimmers, micro fiber towels, combs, brushes and aprons.

Owners experience unexpected bonding as they engage face-to-face with their dogs, giving them their complete attention. The setting is particularly helpful for older dogs who aren't able to spend a day at the groomers. Old Fido can be washed and dried at A Grateful Dog in thirty minutes by the people he loves the most.

"One of the most attractive things to dog owners is that they're able to leave the mess with us," Kristen adds. "It can be a challenging task to keep the shop clean but I have a good system."

The Grateful Dog offers an array of pet items for sale, ranging from toys to grooming products and creatively-packaged treats. Customers enjoy putting pictures of their bathing dogs on the bulletin board that shares space with their **The Grateful Dog** card, ready to be punched at every visit to qualify for future savings.

"I really love what I'm doing," she smiles. "It's so nice to talk with my customers. They all have such interesting stories about their dogs and how they came together. We have a lot of rescue dogs that come in. They always have a story with a happy ending."

Twenty-one years ago, the local MSPCA rescued Kristen Ellis by recognizing her innate way with dogs, then providing her the opportunity to ultimately use that gift as the foundation for her livelihood.

Dogs aren't the only ones who are grateful.



Private stations at The Grateful Dog are equipped with all you need to wash your dog in a fun and friendly atmosphere.



Kristen Ellis, owner of **The Grateful Dog**, with her dog Cowboy.

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No appointments necessary, we
operate on a first come first serve
basis.

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