

## Dog-Ma's Rebecca Bisgyer is the Alpha Dog of Capitol Hill.

by Melanie D. Goldman

Rebecca Bisgyer's subordinates have given a new meaning to the phrase "kissing up to the boss." They kiss her daily. They also fetch toys for her, sleep at her feet when she's at her computer, and -- on good days -- obey her commands. And why wouldn't they? After all, they're dogs.

And Bisgyer, otherwise known as the alpha dog, is the Mary Poppins of Capitol Hill. In September 1998, Bisgyer opened Dog-Ma, the first day care center for dogs in Washington, D.C. The facility, located a few miles from the Capitol and the Supreme Court, is 7,000 square feet of pooch paradise. For Bisgyer, it's absolute heaven.

"I used to be an executive who worked 12-hour days and traveled a lot," says Bisgyer, a former vice president of marketing at Ruesch International, a currency trading firm. "I hired a dog-walker to walk my dogs -- \$15 for a 30-minute walk -- and I felt guilty being gone so much." So, she did what every entrepreneurial dog-lover dreams of doing: she took her mutts, Sam and Morgan, and started researching the dog day care concept. Bisgyer visited centers in New York, Boston and Norfolk, Va., and read volumes about dog behavior. "I learned about how different breeds think and how they deal with each other in packs," she says. "Then I researched the concept, running the numbers, deciding what services to offer, determining what the local health requirements are and what expenses would be and found out that they were four times what I had budgeted." Although Washington's movers and shakers are still getting used to the idea of dropping their pups off for 11 hours of playtime, there is no shortage of potential clients.

Dog-walking is a big business in D.C.'s tree-lined neighborhoods, and Dog-Ma charges just \$20 per day for its services -- only a few bucks more than it costs for a short afternoon walk. Trends show that Baby Boomers across the country are embracing the idea of day care centers for Fido. "Their kids are gone and they want to spend a lot of money on their pets," says Bisgyer, 37. Her clients include

attorneys, World Bank employees and Congressional staffers. When you walk throughout the privacy fence and the periwinkle front door of Dog-Ma, you're welcomed by a gaggle of dogs -- one of them tenderly holding a stuffed animal in his mouth, and another slobbering on a blue, tangerine-sized ball. The pebble-covered yard is the community play area. Decorations include a flag honoring everyone's favorite canine, Snoopy.

Inside is Bisgyer's office; with a makeshift desk, a black-and-white checkered floor, dog beds and a dry-erase board on which are printed

***The Nations  
Capitol is  
full of workaholics  
with lonely dogs.***

the names of everyone present at day care on any particular day. The morning usually starts with a group activity "to establish leadership," explains Bisgyer, donning a black whistle around her neck. "We want the dogs to understand who's the alpha dog . . . and that's me." The dogs naturally break up into play groups, with the young and adolescent ones running together. Many of the dogs are overweight ("I think owners spoil them with food," Bisgyer notes), so the Boss likes to keep them moving. And, of course, there are time-outs taken in crates for dogs that prove to be particularly cranky.

Bisgyer is finding that her business is not too different from running a traditional day care center. Each dog must go through an application interview and must have all its vaccinations. "Just like at a child care center," says Bisgyer, "if one of the kids is sick, all the kids are going to get it. It's the same thing here." Each dog has its own personality and its own needs. Some are on medicine, some take naps, some need to eat at midday, and some have their special toys. And at the end of the day, some of the dogs don't want to go home with their "parents" -- which is both embarrassing and gratifying to Bisgyer. She says, "it's so rewarding when a dog warms up to you."

In the near future, Bisgyer plans to turn Dog-Ma into a 24-hour facility, offering boarding, bathing, grooming, and training. She is also developing a lecture series built around topics such as excessive barking. When Bisgyer thinks back to her day as a corporate executive, managing 100 employees, she cringes. "Now, I'm in a position where I'm controlling my own business. Rather than making a lot of money for someone else, hopefully I'll be making a lot of money for me," she says. "I took the risks that any small business owner takes -- I left something that was very steady and very well-paid, and that's a scary thing to do. But this is a dream realized. I can see the benefits for my clients -- and their owners."