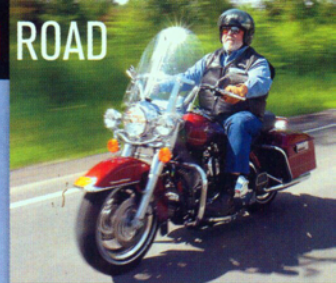


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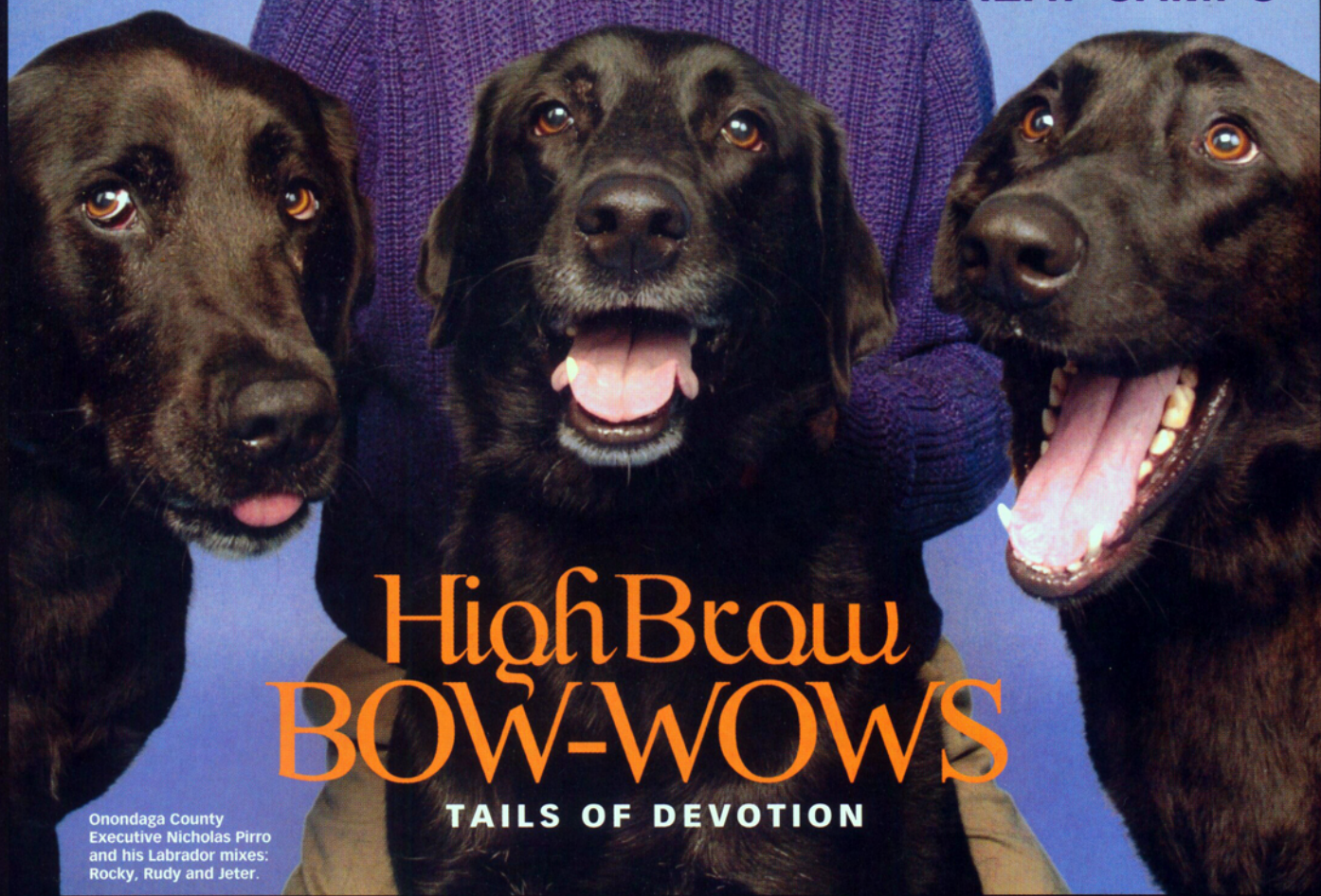
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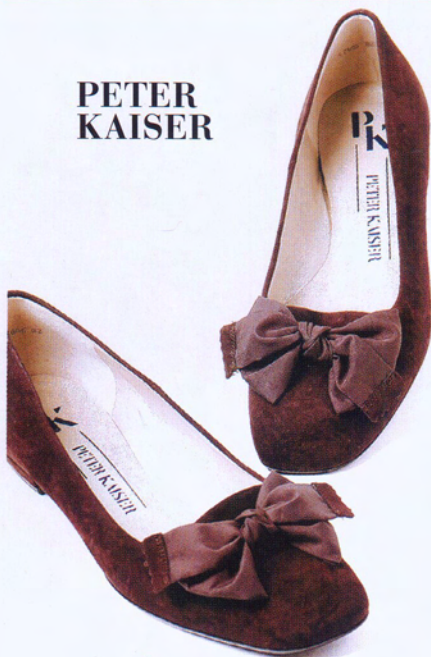
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COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE GREENLAR

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**LEFT,** Onondaga County Executive Nicholas Pirro has three Labrador mixes (left to right): Rudy (hidden behind) Jeter and Rocky.

**ABOVE,** Wawa, a standard poodle, watches for her owner at Blue Prints Dog Services, which offers day-care facilities for dogs.



# DOGMA

NEWSHOUND **SUE WEIBEZAHL** DOGGEDLY PURSUES POOCHES AND THOSE WHO LOVE THEM



In pain and groggy from anesthesia, Nicholas Pirro emerged from his open heart surgery with just one concern.

"How are the puppies?" the Onondaga County Executive asked his wife, Patricia.

The couple's three dogs had been farmed out to their children for the December 2005 surgery and recovery. Nick Pirro hated the thought that his canine companions might be anxious in his absence.

Call it a case of puppy love.

And the Pirros aren't the only ones who have gone to the dogs.

The days that had the family mutt sleeping in the garage and eating table scraps are over.

Dogs these days in Central New York and across the country are now relegated to family-member status. ►



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Many sport jeweled collars and designer wardrobes. They have acupuncturists and aromatherapists, chiropractors and camps designed just for them.

Their owners take them on vacation, brush their teeth, invite them on furniture and fret about their comfort.

"We're finally to the point where dogs are no longer pets, but little, hairy humans," says Alicia Dugan, owner of Animal Dreams and Airbrush in North Syracuse, a business that prints pet portraits and photos on T-shirts and other wearing apparel.

Erin McDonald, who goes to work each day with her shepherd mix, Guinness, understands the phenomenon.

"Dogs are different," says McDonald, who runs a dog day-care business, Blue Prints Dog Services in Syracuse's Nottingham Plaza. "Ever since the wolf was domesticated, it's been companionship for people."

Other species, including people, fall short in offering the same attributes, she says.

"Cats? They have their own agenda, which is 'Pet me when I want you to,'" says McDonald, a former zookeeper with a degree in animal behavior. "Dogs give you unconditional love that you can't get from fish, birds, hamsters or even other humans."

Zalie and Bill Linn, of Manlius, say their two English setters are their surrogate children.

Vacationing without them would seem cruel, so they researched hotels that accept pets and take Darby and Ryman each summer to Camp Gone to the Dogs.

The lodge in Stowe, Vt., attracts owners and their dogs from across the country for weeklong bonding time that includes guided walks, games, classes and even lessons to learn to dance with your dog.

"We've been the past 15 years, so I guess you could say we're hooked," Zalie Linn says.

When they're not traveling, the Linns and their dogs go to area nursing homes and hospitals to cheer up patients.

Locating a good selection of costumes for them to wear to parties was difficult, so Zalie started designing the outfits herself.

"They're really kind of hard to find," she says. "I've been to the tailoring store in Fayetteville, not for myself but to have them work on things for our dogs."

Zalie herself favors black clothes, despite the tell-tale signs of shedding pets that cover her.

"No outfit is complete without dog hair," she says. "We even have a pillow in our house that says that."

The Pirros, who live in Syracuse, readily admit they're a bit obsessed with their three Labrador mixes.

"We're 'Mommy' and 'Daddy,'" Patricia Pirro says, "and they're our puppies. Even when they're 14, they'll always be our puppies."

Rocky showed up on their doorstep seven years ago as a tiny black bundle of fluff and was an easy addition to the family.

Two years later, Rudy was featured on a television segment about animals up for adoption that caught Nick Pirro's eye.

It was just after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, so they named him after former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Jeter, whose namesake is all-star New York Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter, arrived two years ago; the Pirros' daughter-adopted his brother Cruz.

Now that they have three, they can't imagine ever having fewer.

"Two would be too quiet," Patricia Pirro says.

The rambunctious trio vie for attention, beg for treats and dispense huge licks continuously as their owners try to settle them down for a photo.

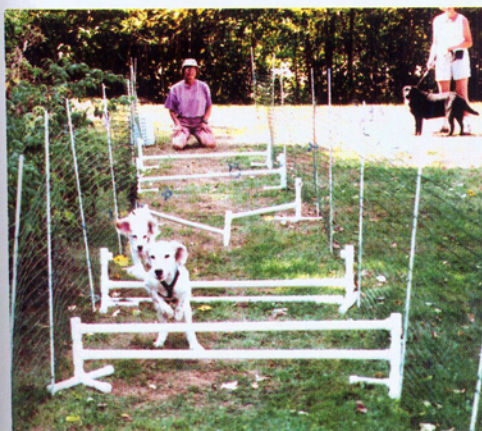
"I'm not sure this will work," Nick Pirro says, laughing as the three lumbered over and around him.

Their Victorian house on Syracuse's North Side is decorated with photos, portraits and figurines of black labs and a huge flag with a lab is mounted at the front door.

With the dogs, Nick Pirro says, "I always have somebody to listen to me and you can never wake up grumpy. They put a smile on your face every day."

Patricia Pirro was a bit more practical





Zalie and Bill Linn, of Manlius, take their two English setters, Darby and Ryman, to Camp Gone to the Dogs, in Stowe, Vt., each summer. The dogs are pictured in their bed at camp and participating in an obstacle course. The lodge attracts owners and their dogs from across the country for weeklong bonding time.

with her assessment of the benefits of dog ownership.

"Your doorbell doesn't need to work, you don't need a home security system and you never have to vacuum up crumbs," she says.

Even their barking at every passer-by, squirrel and blowing leaf is music to her ears, she says.

"It's their little song it's the puppy serenade," she says.

Rocky the pug "snores like a truck, sheds like crazy, and his flatulence is so bad sometimes you can't even be in the same house," his owner, Ron Sixberry, says.

"But I wouldn't give him up for anything," he said. "As homely as he is, you can't look at him without loving him."

Sixberry, who lives in North Volney, northeast of Fulton, says he'd always had large dogs.

That is until his wife, Kathy, brought home a pug puppy last May.

"I come home and there's this thing the size of a rat sitting on my couch," he says. "It's so small it would fit into the palm of your hand and it looked like he'd been beat up. We called him Rocky from then on, and he's the best dog I ever had."

Ron Sixberry said he has never lived without a dog since he was 3 years old, but of all the hounds he's had, Rocky has >



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# DOG MARKETPLACE

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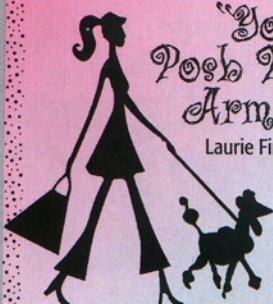
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the most personality.

"He's just straight humor," Sixberry says. "A day doesn't go by that you don't laugh at something he does."

One of those antics is mistaking rocks for predators.

"He hates rocks," Sixberry says. "He growls at them and tries to kill them."

The dog is such an integral part of the family, Sixberry admits, "I don't have pictures of my kids in my office but I have pictures of Rocky everywhere. He's even my screen-saver."

Clients are always struck when they see the pronounced heart in the wrinkles between the pug's eyes.

For the Sixberrys, that's just one more aspect that makes their dog unique.

"We take him everywhere with us," Sixberry says. "He bounces on the trampoline with the kids, he's ridden on four-wheelers and motorcycles. He can't swim, sinks like a stone, but he loves to be in the water, so we got a life jacket for him so he can go in the pool and be on the boat with us. He's got it made."

In the Sixberrys' blended family, the dog is "our kid together," he says. "Although Rocky's still just a year old, the Sixberrys can't imagine life without him."

They've looked up the life expectancy for pugs, which is about 12 to 15 years. "We're already thinking what are we go-

## TOP DOG BREEDS

Man's best friend is going mainstream mini. Call it the Paris Hilton syndrome. Inspired largely by the gawked-upon hotel heiress and her Chihuahua drama of recent years, people's fancy for smaller dogs has grown.

According to American Kennel Club registration statistics, small and toy dogs are becoming increasingly popular, with six handbag-able breeds ranking in the national top 15 since 2000. Here, the 2005 most popular dogs in the United States according to the AKC:

- 1 LABRADOR RETRIEVERS
- 2 GOLDEN RETRIEVERS
- 3 YORKSHIRE TERRIERS
- 4 GERMAN SHEPHERDS
- 5 BEAGLES
- 6 DACHSHUNDS
- 7 BOXERS
- 8 POODLES
- 9 SHIH TZUS
- 10 MINIATURE SCHNAUZERS
- 11 CHIHUAHUAS
- 12 PUGS
- 13 BULLDOGS
- 14 POMERANIANS
- 15 COCKER SPANIELS

— WASHINGTON POST



to do when he goes. That's how attached we are," Sixberry says.

A service that could help is the growing number of bereavement groups in the area that are helping pet owners cope with the loss of their animals.

"For a lot of people, the death of a pet is mourned just as much as if their own child died," Dugan says.

When you have single people, childless couples, empty-nesters, and people who've been widowed or divorced, dogs replace children, she says.

Sue Barr knows firsthand the impact on owners when their dogs pass on.

Barr is the office manager of Pet Haven cemetery in Onondaga Hill, an eight-acre facility that opened in 1930 and is now the eternal resting place for more than 15,000 animals.

Founder Adlai Wheel is interred there himself with the pets he had to bury over the years, she says.

More than 30 other people also have chosen to be buried there with their animals "and I've got many more reservations," says Barr, who calls herself the "in-house grief counselor."

"I know what it's like to lose a pet. I've been there myself and it can be an overwhelming loss," she says. "You don't realize until they're gone how much space in your

life they fill. We have people who come here every day to visit their pets."

The cemetery is open daily from dawn till dusk. Some grave markers feature photos of the animals; others have Bible verses or engravings such as, "I will love you forever."

Barr, who has bred both springer spaniels and German shepherds for decades, doesn't bury her own pets there.

Hers are cremated, she says.

"I'll take them in any shape or form," Barr says. "I don't want to leave them anywhere. Since they're always in my heart, I want them always with me."

The loss of their beloved Golden ►



Wawa receives a haircut from Jackie Foster at Blue Prints Dog Services. Wawa receives a haircut from Jackie Foster at Blue Prints Dog Services.



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Brooke Farley, manager for Blue Prints Dog Services, walks dogs two-by-two for the dog day-care business, which is in Syracuse's Nottingham Plaza.

retriever, "Coconut" devastated the Chutinthronds, who own Lemon Grass restaurant in Armory Square.

The 8-year-old dog died of cancer, "and it just broke our hearts," Max Chutinthrond says.

The Fayetteville couple was committed to the breed, so spent more than a year researching breeders across the country, determined to find one with a lineage that included no deaths from cancer.

"We went back generations and generations, to great-great grandparents," Chutinthrond says.

They finally hit paydirt with a breeder in North Carolina and several months ago, a little blond bundle they named "Toro," who was pick of the litter, became a part of their family.

"We didn't buy a dog; we brought home a friend," Chutinthrond says.

Once someone owns a dog, they'll likely always have one, says Patricia Richards, director of the Central New York SPCA.

"After you've experienced that kind of love, you never want to be without it again," she says. "People want unconditional love, especially with all the stresses they have in their life. After you come home from a hectic, harried day, your dog is there to greet you without screaming at you because you're late. They're always happy to see you."

Richards says she loves hearing the stories people tell when they come to adopt dogs.

## TOP 10 DOG-FRIENDLY CITIES

DogFriendly.com ([www.dogfriendly.com](http://www.dogfriendly.com)) announced its 2006 list of the Top 10 dog-friendly vacation destination cities in North America. DogFriendly.com compiles this list annually for people who want to take their dogs with them on vacation. The rankings are determined by DogFriendly.com researchers and take into account the number and quality of dog-friendly accommodations, transportation, beaches, parks, attractions, stores, dining and other things to do with your dog.

- 1 VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA
- 2 SAN FRANCISCO
- 3 CHICAGO
- 4 BOSTON
- 5 AUSTIN
- 6 SEATTLE
- 7 NEW YORK
- 8 LONG BEACH, CALIF.
- 9 ST. LOUIS
- 10 NORTHERN VIRGINIA

DogFriendly.com, founded in 1998 to provide dog travel information, offers a free website and publishes paperback books. DogFriendly.com's United States and Canada Dog Travel Guide is available at bookstores and at [www.dogfriendly.com](http://www.dogfriendly.com).



"They tell us they're so attached to their dogs, they even call home during the day so their dogs can hear their voices on the answering machine," she says. "It just tugs at your heart to know how special these animals are to people."

The country's obsession with dogs is evidenced by our lexicon.

We have dog day afternoons, are dog *tired*, in the doghouse, have our tails *between* our legs, work like dogs, suffer through dog and pony shows, feel sick as a dog, bark up the wrong tree and live in a dog-eat-dog world.

As their popularity grows, so does the number of available accessories and services, including acupuncture, aromatherapy and chiropractic care all for dogs.

"We have a HydroSurge system, which is like a Jacuzzi for dogs," says Terry Malicek, owner of Groomingdale's in Baldwinsville.

"We use softened water, and it's been great for dogs that are arthritic, old or have hip problems. They love the jets."

Malicek trims and polishes nails, brushes their teeth, puffs fur and sends home her clients with bows and bandanas.

"These are people's babies," she says.

Malicek says she lucked into a good career more than a decade ago.

"Business is booming I couldn't have gotten into a better field," she says.

Dog Daze on Park Street in Syracuse has also seen an upsurge in recent years. It specializes in organic and gourmet dog food not available in grocery chains.

The food is made of ingredients such as carrots, apples, venison, pheasant and bison, and owner David Sturgis knows it tastes good because he samples it.

Sturgis, who owns two Staffordshire terriers, says employees there always wear old

clothes to work.

"That's so we can get right on the floor and play with your dogs," he says.

And dog owners spare no expense to keep their furry friends happy.

One of the most popular items this summer at PetSmart in DeWitt is the "cool bed," says Andy Benson, pet care manager at the store.

Owners fill tubes with water, chill them in the refrigerator or freezer, then insert them into the beds to keep long-haired dogs comfortable during the hot weather, Benson says.

Among the continually hot-selling items are collars of every material, toys, treats, sweaters, leashes and books to help owners both train and understand their pooches.

A frustration many dog owners have is not feeling their pets can only communicate physically. ►



Enter Bow Lingual, a \$120 transmitter you can attach to your dog's collar that inventors say interprets barks. Their messages appear on a small screen and include dozens of phrases such as "I love you," "Don't ignore me" and "I'm jealous."

Colleen Nicholson says recognizing that dogs have personalities and feelings and tapping into them is one of the most important steps their owners can take to forging a positive relationship with their pets.

Nicholson, an animal communicator from Clay who has been interviewed by reporters at radio stations and newspapers across the country, has been telepathically communicating with animals for 15 years.

Dogs, she says, are among the easiest to talk to because they want so much to please people.

And their owners want to please them.

Her busiest season? The months leading

up the December holidays.

"People want to know what their pets want for Christmas, what toys and treats they like, what their favorite colors are," says Nicholson.

And dogs, she says, are eager to share the information.

They also communicate angst over transitions, medical issues and their perspectives about what's happening on the homefront, she says.

Dogs also have an uncanny understand-



ing of their connections to their owners, says Nicholson, whose Internet Web site ([www.holisticanimal.com](http://www.holisticanimal.com)) averages more than 60,000 hits a month.

"It's not about the things you do with your dog that makes them happiest," she says. "It's the relationship you have and the time you put into it. You pet a dog, your blood pressure goes down. And more and more, people are seeking to reward them for the joy and love and acceptance they give us everyday."

The Linns, of Manlius, know the feeling.

"Once you get one, you fall in love," Zalie Linn says. "It's a lonely house without them. After you have a dog, your life will never be the same." ❖

Beverly Allen, of Syracuse, watches her miniature poodle, Rudy, 11, socialize at Blue Prints Dog Services.