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Pet Spa gives Dogs a Bath in Opulence

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GREENSBORO – So you think you're enjoying the good life – slipping into the temperature-controlled water, watching your fountain of youth come to life, feeling its rippling currents send chills up your spine as they beat a rhythm upon the small of your back?

Does the comfort make you raise your chin in confidence by throwing your head back, feeling successful and secure in your self-indulgence?

Actually, you're only living like a dog.

Well, like the dogs sent to Nanhall Pet Spa on Spring Garden Street, anyway.

Established five years ago as part of Nanhall Pet Center, the spa provides whirlpool baths for dogs, with appropriate whirlpool related services included, of course.

“We wanted to help dogs that had gone through painful surgery,” said Hayley Keyes, manager of the unusual business.

Ms. Keyes, the daughter of Nanhall owners Fran and Hall Keyes, added, “ We knew that it (the whirlpool) would help because it helps humans and it's used for horses ... but people have to realize that they (whirlpools) can be extremely dangerous.

According to Ms. Keyes, the whirlpool helps dogs suffering from arthritis and back problems, and aids hair growth. Most dogs that are recommended by veterinarians for the special treatment are slipped-disk patients, she said.

After being bathed and combed free of loose hair, Tory an 8-year old Schipperke is eased into the bubbling water, wearing a look of absolute terror on his heavily whiskered face. But he tolerates it, within the confines of Ms. Keyes' gentle hold, and his legs, showing their thinness in the water, stop kicking after he accepts the new arrangement.

“I've never had many dogs to try to jump out at all,” Ms. Keyes says as Tory squirms toward the edge of the 50-gallon tub. After she places his small, furry body in the mild water, he looks dully ahead until the commotion has stopped some 10 minutes later.

“We start them out on about 10-minute treatments and gradually increase the amount of time,” Ms. Keyes said.

Once a show dog, Tory shows no signs of illness – in fact, he looks quite spry as he throws the water from his fur with a high-tempered wiggle. But the bath is a helpful luxury for aging dogs, even if they're healthy, Ms. Keyes said. "Well, he's 8 years old, so it doesn't him."

Tory doesn't have to work too hard to dry himself. Ms. Keyes soon blankets him with a large towel and carries him to the next room, where he is dried and massaged.

After this, he is blown dry, an oddity for which Tory shows his approval by stretching his front paws forward and extending his neck. The afternoon seems complete as a new ribbon placed around his freshly brushed neck.

This special treatment seems to bring a new vigor to Tory's already high-strung prance. But then he doesn't have to pay for the pampering.

Tory's escape from reality – where dogs must only endure ... bathing in creeks and ponds, then drying under the unmonitored heat of the sun – just lightened his owner's billfold about \$30.

The average price of the whirlpool bath ranges from \$20 to \$40, depending on the size of the dog.

But the treatments can save some dog owners money, according to Ms. Keyes.

"There was a Pekingese who had a dislocated shoulder, so we tried the whirlpool before the vet operated on her, and it worked so well she didn't have to have the operation," she said.

Ms. Keyes said she gives about two whirlpool baths a day, as well as 10 to 15 "regular" baths. She said this pace increases drastically during holiday seasons.

For some, the extravagant care for these canines may seem wasteful, maybe even absurd considering the conditions of many humans.

Ms. Keyes said last year she held a large Thanksgiving for dogs, serving them on silver platters, and "afterward a minister called and complained it was just awful."

Ms. Keyes said that despite having little success in the past with helping the needy, she did try, so now she doesn't feel guilty about pampering her pets. "I work hard for my money so I spend it how I want to," she said.

Since opening a kennel more than 20 years ago, the Keyes family has expanded its pet facility to include three acres of land and indoor-outdoor air-conditioned kennels, which can board about 125 dogs.

Besides offering boarding, Nanhall provides grooming and a grooming school for those who wish to learn, training and professional show handling and a training school for aspiring dog trainers.

But perhaps the most important feature of the Nanhall center is its work to help handicapped humans.

The Keyes family has trained several dogs to help patients with rheumatoid arthritis, and are currently training a dog to help an 11-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who wants to deliver newspapers.

The assistant dogs are trained: to pick up money and dropped items, to offer support as handicapped people stand, to retrieve the telephone, to carry items, and to perform other routine acts difficult for handicapped patients. One dog trained at Nanhall even makes the bed for its owner.

“All dogs are trained dogs by what you allow them to do,” Ms. Keyes said. “Dogs have a mature brain at seven weeks.”

Ms. Keyes walks into Nanhall’s office, three walls of which are covered with show dog medals and ribbons, and greets four miniature longhair dachshund puppies as if they were human babies.

“Sweeties ... look at you, you’re so silly,” she says, reaching down in the crib to rub their heads.

“A lot of people have a feel for dogs and horses, and we’ve just always had dogs,” Ms. Keyes said.

“It just sort of evolved through the family.”