

Professional Pet Sitter

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Ring! Ring! It's Melissa Garvan Calling!

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NAPPS



Ring! Ring! It's Melis

This busy co-owner of a Charleston-based pet sitting company finds time to aid NAPPS members.

By Arden Moore

Photos by Lucy Cuneo of Lucy Cuneo Photography

M eet Melissa Garvan, the face behind that friendly voice of knowledge and understanding for many NAPPS members. Yep, she is the one who may have called you after you joined NAPPS to welcome you, reassure you and help you really feel part of this association. Or she may reach out to you as your membership is up for renewal to alert you of key or new benefits NAPPS offers.

Having trouble setting up your NAPPS membership password? Not sure how to utilize tips shared on the NAPPS Chat Forum? Or unsure how to network with local veterinary clinics to attract more clients?

Relax. Help is on the other end of the line, courtesy of Melissa Garvan, co-owner of The Charleston Dog Walking, Inc. in Charleston, SC.

"Melissa is our member-to-member lifeline," describes Cathe Delaney, NAPPS Administrative Director.

Adds NAPPS president Yvette Gonzales, "Melissa is that helpful voice to our members. She is a very hard worker and willing to answer questions and take the time to really talk with our members."

Garvan Calls Six Days A Week

Each month, Garvan, as an active volunteer on the NAPPS membership committee, averages 100 to 300 calls to members. And, most likely, she is making those calls right after walking dogs in scenic Charleston or right before she heads to a home to cater to a pair of cats. And, while she does use a landline on occasion, most of her calls are made on her cell phone, as she walks around her home office or while she is out and about in this historic southern city known for its charm and friendliness.

And if you happen to hear a friendly bark or yip during your call, it's probably either her goofy Corgi named Bud or her sweet Basset Hound named Sarah.

"I could be talking to a NAPPS member in California or Alabama and one of my dogs will bark and I just quickly say, 'Oh sorry,' and continue," says Garvan. "I try to make calls every day except on Sundays."

Seeing the many benefits NAPPS has extended to her as she launched her company, Garvan is giving back even more. Earlier this year, she joined the NAPPS



Education and Networking Forum Committee to help with the planning of the NAPPS Education and Networking Forum set for March 11-13, 2016 in Orlando.

"I love calling members and putting their minds at ease with questions they may have," says Garvan. "And, I also recognize the importance of getting the opportunity to meet face-to-face and share ideas, which is why I encourage our members to attend the upcoming forum. After all, this is our professional organization and we have to support it by volunteering to keep it thriving for all of us."

Garvan Aids Animals in Charleston

Locally, Garvan is also making a difference in bettering the lives of pets (those lucky to have loving homes and those waiting to be adopted at local shelters and rescue groups). She contributes time, talent and donations for the Charleston Animal Society.

"Melissa always meets her goal to help make homeless animals' lives better," says Kay Hyman, director of community engagement for the Charleston Animal Society. "Most recently, her efforts to raise much need dog and cat food for our pet pantry has helped many less fortunate animal guardians."

Clients, past and present, didn't hesitate when asked to describe Garvan's many talents. One of the major regrets of leaving Charleston to relocate and be closer to her new granddaughter in Sommers, CT was not having Garvan to pet sit Quincy, her golden retriever, and Leo, her Bengal



sa Garvan Calling!

cat. Lewis, and her husband, Peter, relied on Garvan for five years while their jobs in the medical field required them to travel or work long hours.

“Melissa is a genuine animal whisperer,” describes Kelly Lewis. “You can sense the genuine, innate love she has for those in need — people and pets. She is also very fun and a real salt of the earth. I remember the day we were moving to Connecticut and there was Melissa cuddling Quincy on our front porch. What a very special lady she is.”

Lucy Cuneo, a professional photographer who operates the Lucy Cuneo Photography studio in Charleston, appreciates that she can count on Garvan to shower her cats, Bandit and Agave, with plenty of love, attention and play when Cuneo has to travel as a destination wedding photographer.

“We interviewed a few people, but Melissa was the most responsive and organized,” says Cuneo. “She came over immediately to meet the cats and they loved her right away. And, that’s amazing because Bandit and Agave are quite shy.”

She adds, “Melissa is so reliable and is always messaging us photos of our cats, which is very comforting when we are so far away. She scoops the litter, takes care of our plants, feeds and plays with our cats every day when we are away. And our cats always seem very happy when we get home and I credit that to Melissa.”

Charleston Pet Sitting Competitors Merge

A firm believer in working together, Garvan has never regarded any other dog walking or pet sitting company in the Charleston area as rivals. In fact, she actively introduces herself and welcomes those new in the business, including Mallory Cooper, who started Curious Paw when she moved to South Carolina in 2013.

“I was new to the area and Melissa quickly reached out to me and invited me to be part of a local group of pet sitters she organized that meets to have breakfast, talk and help one another out,” says Cooper. “She answered lots of my questions. A year later, I was getting to the point in my business where I needed extra help and Melissa was using independent contractors at the time.”

The light bulb illuminated in both Garvan and Cooper. They talked on the phone about merging their two businesses. By the end of the call, the deal was done.

Since January, they co-own Charleston Dog Walking, Inc. and together, have expanded clients and converted contractors into part-time employees.

“We have different strengths,” notes Cooper. “I like office and paperwork and Melissa loves being with the animals and meeting people. One of our top priorities for our new company was to implement a new software program that helps clients schedule appointments or visits online. It sends email updates to clients instead of leaving written notes.”

Adds Garvan, “It’s been a good business decision. Mallory is younger, more techie and has taught me a lot. I bring years of customer service experience to help her learn how to deal with difficult clients.”

As a visible sign of the merger, all employees wear Charleston Dog Walking t-shirts when on the job — except Garvan.

“It helps our employees feel part of the team and it promotes our business,” says Garvan, adding with a laugh. “But I’m sticking with my Polo shirts with our logo. I’ve not a t-shirt-wearing gal.”

Garvan, who grew up in Connecticut, moved to Charleston in 1987. Two years later, Hurricane Hugo struck, flooding and destroying the contents in her rented apartment.



KEEPING IN STEP WITH THE CHARLESTON DOG WALKER

Founded by Melissa Garvan in 2010, Charleston Dog Walker serves clients in James Island, downtown Charleston, Folly Beach, and parts of West Ashley and Johns Island.

In January 2015, Garvan and Mallory Cooper, founder of a pet sitting company in Charleston called Curious Paws, agreed to merge and co-run The Charleston Dog Walking business. Together, they and their staff of nine part-time employees specialize in dog walking, vacation visits, overnight visits, hotel and campground visits, and wedding services. Yes, you read correctly: wedding services.

“Charleston is a top destination for beach weddings,” explains Garvan. “A lot of couples include their pets in their ceremonies. One time, I was hired to walk a Boston terrier mix down the aisle. I truly think the dog felt the love and knew this was a special occasion.”

Learn more by visiting www.charlestondogwalker.com.

“What little stuff I had in the car was all I had left,” she recalls.

But it is the can-do spirit of Charleston in the hurricane’s aftermath that has made her recognize the value of being neighboring and volunteering to aid others.

“I didn’t have a place to live after Hugo and people opened up their homes to myself and others,” she says. “I have so much to be thankful for and feel blessed every day to get to be outdoors and to be with pets. I love my job and my only regret is that I wish I had gotten into the pet sitting business 40 years ago.” ■