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Local woman isn't dogging it with canine training biz

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Laura Pakis has collared the market on dog training in southern Delaware County.

Pakis is the owner of Acme Canine, a dog-training business in Lewis Center that she started out of a small apartment seven years ago.

Since then, her company's revenues have doubled every year except for one, which was during the recession, and she now operates the business out of a 1,200-square-foot facility.

"I saw a need for it. I would always hear about people talking about 'Oh, my dog flunked out of obedience school' but it doesn't have to be that way," said Pakis. "It just started out as a hobby."

A divorced mother who worked a variety of jobs, including as a secretary and office manager, the avid gardener dropped out of school, where she was studying botany, and followed her heart.

"I was going to be a botanist but I quit school to pursue my passion," said Pakis.

Though a lifelong dog lover, she didn't know that much about training dogs, so she started reading about the subject and even got some training at the National Canine Association.

"I started reading books ... it was a natural process, I guess," she said.

With a cooperative landlord, Pakis started training dogs out of her apartment. Though much of her business was done in customers' homes, she did have some sessions in her apartment and even had a kennel there.

Soon business started to pick up.

She moved out of the apartment and bought a house, which quickly became home to the dog-training business.

"I had four kennels in the dining area and the kitchen was the puppy pre-school," Pakis said.

In the first year, she said she spent a lot of money on marketing and advertising to let people know about her business.

"That's hard to do because in the beginning you

just want to make money," said Pakis.

But the business kept growing and two years ago she added a 1,200-square-foot area to the house for Acme Canine.

"It's nice now because I can leave the business and walk back into my house," Pakis said.

Instead of one kennel in an apartment she now has seven kennels, an open training space, an area to wash dogs and laundry facilities.

She has help, now, too. She has hired two other trainers, kennel staff and a bookkeeper.

Pakis picked up the necessary skills to be a good dog trainer, but she is also now a small business owner, something she had to learn how to be along the way, too.

"What's amazing is there are so many resources out there. Small business associations, chambers, lots of seminars out there. And it really didn't cost a thing," she said.

Eventually she did also hire a business coach when she was starting to get really serious about the business.

But, perhaps most importantly, business owners need to love what they do to succeed, she said.

"You have to have that passion for your business. With all of the long hours you put in, you need to love it," Pakis said.

While she says she sets the overall philosophy and mission of the business, she encourages feedback from her employees.

"This job allows me to use my creativity and to be open-minded. Anything we want to try we evaluate it and then give it a try," Pakis said.

Most of her customers are simply individuals who want their dogs trained, usually through a five-week training program. She trains all kinds of dogs that are all kinds of ages.

As for the future, she says that there are no immediate plans for further expansion.

"If you get too big you aren't going to be able to give that personal service," Pakis said.

So, for now at least, she's content to let sleeping dogs lie.