

IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

A dog on hand will flush birds from the bush

MIRIAM KING

"I've always been an animal addict, all my life," laughs Sherri Hall. "I blame my mother. She was always rescuing wild animals, and we kids were always involved in their care."

It was a background that was to shape her career choices - she studied to be a Vet Tech, graduating in 1997, and later worked as "Rabies Inspector" for the Town of Markham.

That job introduced her to horrors of puppy mills; it also required her to euthanize "unwanted" animals. "After four years, I had to quit, because I couldn't fit any more animals in at home - and that includes the barn."

Her love of animals also led her on a unique entrepreneurial journey: Hall established Maplelane Golden Retrievers Kennel, Bye Bye Birdie Goose Control Services Ltd., and Elite Detection Dogs Ltd. and now provides K-9 Control for the Town of New Tecumseth and Animal Control for Innisfil.

Dogs were a passion and a hobby before they became a business for Hall. Married to a Police Officer, she drove a school bus for 25 years and the family "always had dogs and horses," living on a farm on the 12th Line of New Tecumseth.

She got into the breeding of Golden Retrievers about 20 years ago - a reaction to the puppy mills, and a desire to "do it right" to preserve the best traits of the animal through good breeding for an "extended family" of customers. "In 20 years of breeding I probably have about 1,200 puppies out there, and I keep in touch with every one of them," Hall says - hosting an annual Golden Reunion at the farm.

It was while living on the 12th Line that she became aware of the problem posed by the large flocks of Canada Geese that descend on fairways and parks during breeding season - especially a problem at the nearby Nottawasaga Inn Resort. As a trainer of border collies for doing dog sports, "I knew I could train them to herd the geese," Hall says.

She approached the management of the golf course, and offered to provide goose control for free, "to prove myself." Hall and her dogs were "very, very successful." They not only got paid, it was the start of Bye Bye Birdie Goose Control Services.

It's not just a matter of letting dogs run loose and chase the geese. The Border Collies stalk and herd the birds - simulating the actions of wolves and coyotes in the goose's instinctual bird brain, persuading the geese that the area is patrolled by predators and therefore unsafe.

"We also incorporated egg-oiling, under permit, from Canadian Wildlife Services. You have to do the birth control," Hall explains - "otherwise the goslings when they mature return to where they were born, perpetuating the cycle. And if the eggs are allowed to hatch, the adults immediately moult and lose their flight feathers. The park, golf course or airport is then stuck with them for the next 2 months until the feathers grow back. And geese," Hall says, "produce well over 1 lb. of feces per day, per bird."

It generally takes 3 to 5 years to eliminate a goose problem using her combination of biological controls. The Nottawasaga Inn went from about 1,200 resident geese in 2004, to 100-200 birds in just 2 years.

Hall's business began to grow, "because there was nobody else doing it," and she signed contracts with a "very diversified" group of customers including golf courses, industrial properties, and cemeteries. She was on the verge of offering franchises to overcome the "geographical challenges" of having a single location in central Ontario - when disaster struck.

On February 12, 2008 fire destroyed her house. Hall lost everything including 17 dogs. "It was the most humbling experience of my life...It was overwhelming and horrific for the longest time."



Sherri Hall, with truck, is becoming a familiar sight around Innisfil since the company took on Animal Control for the municipality.

Now, looking back, she calls the fire "a gift."

Hall ended up operating her business in a 24' trailer as her home was being rebuilt. "and Bye Bye Birdie grew 300% in income, without going out of the driveway - all by word of mouth."

Mentored by George Cohon, of McDonald's fame, she discovered the "power of positive energy...It opened a lot of doors."

Hall was insured, and eventually had everything restored. Her "doggie friends" had raised money through the Maplelane Fire Fund and Hall decided to spend the funds on something special, in memory of the animals that perished in the house fire. She contacted the U.S. based Noah's Wish Animal Rescue Service, a service that rescues any domestic animals from pets to livestock, abandoned during natural disasters.

Not only did she become involved in bringing Noah's Wish to Ontario, she went through the training to become a certified disaster responder - and is now working with local municipalities to incorporate animal rescue in their Emergency response plans.

For Hall, it was logical to get into Animal Control, starting with New Tecumseth - which had one of the highest incidences of puppy mills "because there were no by-laws." Last year, Bye Bye Birdie Goose Control successfully bid on the Animal Control contract for the Town of Innisfil.

Hall brings a unique approach to the job. "I don't think there's any company that can touch the way we handle it." Not just enforcement, Hall focuses on educating the owner.

"We do everything by the book," she says. "Our philosophy in our Animal Control division is to enforce and educate, especially repeat offenders, and those who "hold their street hostage." Faced with the choice of a \$405 ticket for allowing a dog to run at large or 6 weeks of obedience classes for about \$150, most choose the obedience route. She even carries the cards of local obedience trainers to hand out - supporting local businesses.

Owner and dog then have to pass a K-9 Good Neighbour's test. "If you can pass, then I'll rip up these charges," Hall tells offenders. "It's working quite well."

What isn't working well is the reclamation of animals caught running at large and impounded at an Innisfil facility. Only 40% of the dogs picked up in Innisfil are ever claimed, none of the cats. "It's very sad. People," Hall says, "just don't want to pay the pound fees and fines - although there is a simple solution: a \$20 annual dog tag. That's your get out of jail free card." With a valid dog tag, the animal can be immediately returned - at no charge, for a first offence.

If there are subsequent offences, Hall will work with the owner to come up with a solution. Again, it's a matter of education.

Her long term goal? To be able to offer local municipalities a combination of Animal Control and Goose Control Services, in the same budget - allowing her to deal with the complaints of goose droppings at Innisfil Beach Park, which led to a closure of some beaches last summer due to high Ecoli counts.

ELITE DETECTION DOGS NOW TRAINED HERE



In the meantime, Hall has branched out into Elite Detection Dogs Ltd. - specially trained dogs that can sniff out drugs and mold, used mostly by management firms worried about grow operations in their apartment buildings; but also peanut allergy dogs, cadaver and accelerant dogs, even dogs trained to sniff out bed bugs for pest control companies.

"The world of detection dogs is big, big, big in the U.S. They use detection Dogs for everything," she says. Her success is not only attracting attention, it's receiving recognition. She won the South Simcoe Business Excellence Award in 2008, as Entrepreneur of the Year.

"I had to learn to diversify," Hall says, explaining that company she has started, "they're offshoots of each other." Her companies employ 4 people full time, 1 part time - but numbers double during Goose Control season and in summer she hires 8 university students to carry out door to door dog tag sales in New Tecumseth. Last year, Bye Bye Birdie Goose Control brought in \$43,000 in dog tag fees in that municipality.