Pam Runnels of Critter Care tempts Chester, a carnivorous Chinese Water Iguana, with a dish of fruit salad during a house call.

Taking care of Fido not what it used to be

Pet care specialists face many challenges

By STEPHANIE GAUTHREAUX

There are people out there who, if you can't be home to do it yourself, will feed live mice to your pet snake or pop the frozen carcass of a mouse in a microwave so that your pet can have a hot meal.

And, these same people — pet care specialists — will even bunk with your pet if that is what Fluffy is accustomed to. In fact, these specialists are asked to do almost anything to feed and comfort pets while their masters are away.

"As long as it's humane and we're not in danger, we'll do it," said Pam Runnels, who with Cresie Gordon, own Critter Care, Inc.

Sandra Champagne, of Champagne's Special Pet Care, said, "I'm willing to do just about anything a person asks me. If it's something their animal's used to doing on a regular basis, I'm happy to oblige."

Granted, it's a strange business with odd demands, but someone's got to do it.

If it weren't for people like Runnels and Gordon, who would go to a pet owner's house, cook sirloin patties which have been rolled by a maid, chop them and hand-feed the bite-sized nuggets to two poodles in their care? They'll even care for a temperamental carnivorous iguana who won't hesitate to bite visitors.

Gordon and Runnels will even feed live mice to snakes. For those snakes who eat dead mice, they'll retrieve the mice from the freezer and thaw them in the microwave.

As owners of Critter Care, a kennel that makes housecalls to pets who can't cope with the prospect of a kennel stay, Runnels and Gordon are well-acquainted with the little quirks of animals and their owners.

"Some animals will only eat on a stool, or out of a certain bowl. They can be as peculiar as people," said Runnels.

"It's not unusual for a pet to eat out of China," said Gordon. "Similarly, Champagne is accustomed to accommodating pets' habits."

Champagne once called herself the "pet nanny," until she discovered it was the name of a franchise. She no longer uses it, but she said the term still applies to her approach to the animals.

"I give them that extra something that makes them feel like they're loved," said Champagne, citing the example of a cat to whom she spoon feeds baby food. "If the pet is interested, I spend time petting and brushing."

Critter Care and Champagne's Special Pet Care attend to pets in the pets' home — feeding them, cleaning up after them, taking them on walks, and giving them their medicine.

Champagne said the service appeals to owners who like the extra attention their animals receive.

"A lot of people hate the thought of their pet being confined to a cage," Champagne said. "We take care of a lot of pets who have owners that are very particular with their animals."

"A lot of pets have had a bad experience in kennels. If it's a prolonged visit, a lot of them don't do that well in a kennel," Runnels said her customers like the convenience and the freedom from kennel worries.

"There's the issue of the animal being confined, of sharing fleas. Most kennels are in pretty good shape, but kennel cough can be rampant."

Most of the customers are vacationers, but Champagne sometimes gets requests from customers who are working late and can't make it home to feed the pet.

Runnels said her customers range from slightly lower middle income to upper middle income.

"On the low end, people who don't have much money don't go anywhere. People who have a great deal of money have live-in servants," she said.

See PETS, Page 2B
The average customer is between the ages of 38 and 50 and is in a two-income household with a total income of between $45,000 to $70,000. The average animal owner has three pets—usually cats and dogs, although exotic birds are on the rise.

Undaunted by Chester the iguana’s formidable sidewise glance, which he offered as he sat unrestrained and perched on a shelf ready for action. “If he gets aggravated or in a bad mood, he bites,” Runnels said.

But Chester isn’t the only client that can “scare the fire out of” Runnels.

Runnels and Gordon recount stories of chasing 6-foot vegetarian iguanas off curtains and negotiating with a fierce Siamese cat who stationed herself atop a refrigerator, waiting with sharp claws to dive on them when they arrived.

Critter Care takes care of an attack dog that Runnels and Gordon feed with a tube to avoid being attacked.

“The customer’s been robbed so many times; the dog is trained to kill,” said Runnels. “We don’t enter his area.”

Champagne said her most dramatic experience in the business was dealing with a dog who could not swim but jumped into his owner’s pool and almost drowned.

“It was really scary,” she said.

Both services learn to deal with these pets because they like to avoid turning down customers.

“If we think we’re going to be in real danger, we might turn the customer down,” said Runnels. “We always try to do everything we can because the customer is relying on us to make their life better.”

In their efforts to make the customer’s life better, Runnels and Gordon have even accepted requests to stay overnight — in the same bed as the pet.

“We have owners that have specific beds they want us to sleep in and the pets sleep with us,” Runnels said.

Champagne occasionally will take a pet into her own home upon request, although she never takes in more than one at a time.

The services take pets very seriously. Runnels and Gordon have even begun offering grief therapy for their clients who lose pets.

“It’s a very real experience. Pets are like our children,” said Runnels. “There have been people who have committed suicide” over the loss of a pet.

Runnels and Gordon recently received a call from a local woman whose son, living in California, was depressed because his pet had cancer.

Runnels called the man and referred him to a grief counselor in Los Angeles.

When the situation warrants it, they refer the client to a therapist. But Runnels and Gordon have attended seminars to learn to help client’s cope with grief.

“Mostly,” Runnels said, they just want us to listen and sit with them.”