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Pet-care workers hope to be groomed for good jobs

By Deborah Deasy
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If you enjoy dogs, physical exercise and lots of positive feedback, pet grooming could be a career for you.

The profession offers more than 2,000 current job openings, according to PetGroomer.com, and full-time groomers reportedly can earn \$30,000 to \$50,000 per year -- or more.

"You can go anywhere and get a job," says Mitzi Parrish of Houston, Texas, president of the Golden Paws chain of U.S. dog grooming schools.

The schools include the new Golden Paws Pet Styling Academy at the Pet Salon in Scott Towne Center, Scott Township.

"It's very therapeutic, working with animals," Parrish says. "It's wonderful to have owners thank you every day."

It takes about eight weeks and costs about \$6,000 to complete basic training at three Pittsburgh-area dog-grooming schools, which also includes the Pennsylvania Academy of Pet Grooming in Indiana County and the Pampered Pet School of Dog Grooming in Brentwood.

Home study courses are another option. A number of world-class dog groomers offer instructional DVDs.

Laid-off secretary Patty Sala, 53, of Rostraver, Washington County, recently found a new job in one day after enrolling in the Pampered Pet School of Dog Grooming in Brentwood.

"Sometimes, you get burned out on a career. I got tired of sitting at a computer. I wanted to do something physical," Sala says. "I love dogs, and I always thought this would be a good career."

At the new Golden Paws Pet Styling Academy in Scott -- one of nine Golden Paws academies in the United States -- aspiring groomers can start a two-month course, priced \$5,805, on any Wednesday. Students work at their own pace. Tuition includes about \$750 in tools.

"The nice thing is, they will have a fabulous trade in eight weeks, which is something that is totally amazing nowadays," says Roseanna Caruso, a groomer at the Pet Salon in Scott Towne Center.

Caruso likens dog grooming to transforming any pet into a work of art. "It's a canvas where you make your masterpiece," Caruso says.

"We don't stress the dog," Parrish says. "If we can't do something, we tell the owner."

The Golden Paws curriculum begins with an overview of dog body parts, followed by the how-tos of trimming nails, cleaning ears, brushing, bathing, drying and clipping coats of many lengths and textures.

"There's a right way and a wrong way to dry the dog, depending on the breed," says Karen Silla, instructor at the Golden Paws academy. "Normally, curly coats have to be brushed as they're dried, to make them fluff out, like a Bichon Frise."

Silla worked as a supervisor for an office cleaning firm before she, too, turned to dog grooming as a new career.

A thorough dog grooming, including bathing and clipping, generally costs \$40 to \$50.

Dog groomers typically earn their pay in 30 percent to 50 percent commissions on that rate, Caruso says.

Paying a professional to groom your dog is "one of the healthiest things you can do for your pet," says Stephen Mart of Yelm, Washington, Web master for PetGroomer.com.

That's because groomers find everything from suspicious lumps to embedded foreign objects when they groom a pet.

Mart says it takes one or two years for a novice to hone the skills necessary to groom seven or eight dogs per day -- the average number processed by professionals.

Dog groomers who work full time -- eight hours a day, five days a week -- generally can earn \$30,000 to \$50,000 per year, and the U.S. dog grooming industry generally offers 2,000 to 3,000 job openings on any given day, according to Mart.

Job seekers can find a number of those opportunities on PetGroomer.com. The online site recently listed about 10 available area jobs in towns ranging from Scottsdale, Westmoreland County, to Aliquippa, Beaver County.

Dog grooming is an unregulated profession in the United States, but groomers can boost their earning power and credibility by obtaining certification through one of multiple organizations.

It costs \$125, for example, to take the certification exam offered at sites across the country by National Dog Groomers Association, based in Hermitage, Mercer County.

"The industry is always looking for good groomers," says Jeff Reynolds, executive director of the association. "The problem is, it's a high turnover industry."

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