

Winter 2023

PET SITTER'S WORLD

Holiday Hazards

Keeping the pets in your care away from danger

Bonus
Holiday '23
Issue

Scheduling Staff

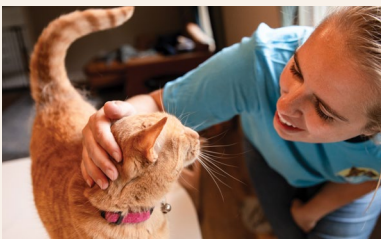
The pros and cons of requiring staff to work on holidays

+ Most Common Website Issues
How to correct them before the New Year



PSI MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: Ashley Elliott, Jackie & Joe's Pet Care

By Meghann Evans, PSI Education & Outreach Manager



If Ashley Elliott included a list of all the animals she had cared for on her resume, it would run on for a while. Giraffes, elephants, tigers, horses, iguanas, cats, dogs—you name it, Ashley has probably cared for it over the years. From growing up on a farm to working

as a zookeeper to running her own pet-sitting business, Ashley has been surrounded by animals her entire life.

"I have such a large variety of experience with different types of animals and animal behavior," says Ashley, owner of



[Jackie & Joe's Pet Care](#). “I think that experience really makes people feel more secure when leaving their pet with me, knowing that I’ve done this for years and I do know how to read animal behavior.”

Life took a circuitous route to lead Ashley back to pet sitting in her home state of Michigan—an adventure she now gets to share with her mom, Chris, who serves as her backup sitter.

At the start of 2020, Ashley was starting a new job as a zookeeper at Busch Gardens in Florida. There she worked mostly with birds, as well as kangaroos.

“It was really cool,” Ashley says. “That was my favorite [zookeeping] job.”

Ashley had earned her zoology degree from Michigan State University and gained experience with a variety

of wild and exotic animals—elephants and a giraffe at Jacksonville Zoo; tigers, babirusa and sloth bears at Zoo Tampa; and the list goes on.

But what Ashley couldn’t have known when she moved to Florida is that three months into her new job, the COVID-19 pandemic would disrupt life as we know it. As the newest zookeeper, Ashley was the first to be let go, but her journey with animals wasn’t over.

Change of plans

After her job at Busch Gardens ended, Ashley worked as the office manager for her husband’s mobile RV repair business. She gained skills that would prove invaluable down the road—scheduling, customer service, advertising, posting on social media, and more.

Ashley and Joseph decided to move back home to Michigan to be near family, and in December 2022, Ashley started her pet-sitting business, Jackie & Joe’s Pet Care, in Clio, Michigan, a more rural area near the city of Flint. Ashley named the company after her beloved childhood pets, a dog Jackie and cat Joe, who passed away and are featured on her company logo.

This isn’t Ashley’s first experience running a pet-sitting service, though. In college, she started Ashley’s Pet-Sitting Services as a way to make money while in school, and as often happens, the side gig took off and became a full-time job. She operated her pet-sitting service from 2013-16, before moving to pursue her zoology degree.

When Ashley decided to start pet sitting again last year, it was perfect timing for her mom, who was retiring

(continued)

and now serves as the emergency/ backup sitter for Ashley.

Ashley says they have always been close, like best friends, even when she was a teenager.

“We laugh, we joke, so it’s actually a really, really fun time,” Ashley says of working with her mom. “It’s like two best friends working.”



Tip for success: “I think the most important thing when working with family is communication,” Ashley says. “Don’t let things go unspoken and don’t let your feelings get bottled up.” Ashley says you have to have the hard conversations, and make sure “that everybody is on the same page and you’re treating each other with respect, with kindness.”

Ashley currently serves about 60 clients and hopes to bring on employees by next year.

From wild animals to domestic

To provide excellent care, Ashley tries to think about the perspective of the pet.

Tip for success: Sometimes you may get frustrated if a dog doesn’t want to go into its kennel or a cat is scared of you, for example. Ashley advises to think about it from their side of things and “try to help them through that; always be sympathetic to them.” She says: “If you’re thinking about what their perspective is, I think you’re going to give them better care.”

Despite the differences between wild and domestic animals, Ashley has found that the skills she gained in zoology are helpful as a pet sitter.

“When you’re working with the large animals [in the zoo], safety is always a top priority, of not only you but the animal as well,” she explains.



That focus on safety directly translates to pet sitting, Ashley says, whether that means doublechecking locks or reading animal behavior. The animal behavior classes she completed at MSU have been a big help to her as a pet sitter.

Cleaning is another essential aspect of zookeeping, Ashley says, and is vital in pet sitting as well. Training animals, using positive reinforcement, is also key.

“We’re always training animals in the zoo. Every day they’re doing a training session with each of our animals,” Ashley says, “and it’s always positive reinforcement, which directly translates to our pets at home.”

Tip for success: Ashley says treats are an invaluable pet-care tool for positive reinforcement, helping dogs connect with you, distracting dogs and more. “Just always having treats on you is so powerful, because you can use it in so many ways,” she says.



Range of services

Jackie & Joe’s Pet Care offers pet sitting, dog walking, wedding pet attendant services, pet taxi/ transportation, pet photography, and puppy care.

The specifics of the wedding services vary depending on the couple’s needs. Ashley typically picks the pet up from home and takes it to the venue; gets the pet prepped for walking down the aisle, whether they will be wearing flowers or a

bow tie; makes sure the pet poses for pictures; and ensures the pet behaves.

“(I’m) making sure that the pet can be included in a positive way and everybody’s happy,” Ashley says.

Tip for advice: For pet sitters who are considering adding wedding services, Ashley recommends looking at websites to see how much other wedding pet attendants are charging or reaching out to them to ask for advice. You can also join Facebook groups for brides in your area to see if people are interested in the service.

Ashley partners with a local photographer for the pet photography service. If the photographer gets inquiries where pets are included, Ashley can be there to assist with pet handling—for example, with an engagement shoot or a pet birthday. She also refers her clients to the photographer.

“It is so much fun,” Ashley says. “Doing the weddings and doing the pet photography is just such a fun part of the job, and I’m so glad I decided to do it.”

Ashley has been working recently to obtain her dog-trainer certification and plans to add dog-training services in the future. She is also working to obtain her Fear Free certification.

“Always be learning,” Ashley advises pet sitters.

Growing the business

Ashley doesn’t do much paid advertising, but she has benefited from using Facebook for her business—not just having a Facebook business page, but also joining Facebook groups for area residents.

“Joining those pages and being active in them, even if it’s not for pet sitting, you’re just getting your name out there,” she says. “People will see Jackie & Joe’s Pet Care and it will be

stuck in their heads. The next time they think about pet care, they’ll think about us.”

She also benefits from her Google listing and reviews—and from word-of-mouth referrals.

In addition to her pet-care experience, one of Ashley’s top selling points is her focus on communicating with clients well—“with respect, with kindness, and just really making them feel like I care and I’m there for them.”

To spread the word about her business, Ashley also puts out business cards and fliers around town.

Tip for success: Ashley says whenever a new business opens in town, such as a restaurant, she goes in to introduce herself and be friendly. “Everywhere I go I’m trying to network and spread the word about my business,” she explains.

Ashley uses Time To Pet’s pet-sitting software to manage her business operations—from scheduling to invoicing to messaging clients—and she loves listening to podcasts to learn what other pet sitters are doing.

“It gives you so many ideas,” Ashley says. “You can be really creative once you start getting those ideas rolling. You just need that little push.”

She joined PSI because she wanted to stand out as well.

“People go to your website, they want to see that you’re part of professional organizations—that you are actively learning, you’re actively trying to do better,” Ashley says. “And PSI is always there with resources and guides to make your business better and to help you with your business.”

Full circle moment

Ashley is now living a variation of a dream she had as a kid. She always

wanted to start a doggie daycare or dog-boarding facility and thought caring for pets would be so much fun.

“As I got older, that dream was always in the back of my head—‘What if I got to do that one day?’” Ashley recalls.

A few years ago, she decided that if she ever had a doggie daycare or boarding service, she would name it after Jackie and Joe.

“They just meant so much to me, and they were always my biggest inspiration for wanting to do that,” Ashley explains.

While she doesn’t offer boarding and daycare—at least, not yet—she was still able to name her pet-sitting service after her beloved pets.

Ashley is living the dream, and she makes sure she takes time off to protect it, whether that looks like bingeing TV shows for relaxation, spending time with her own pets, or going to the movies or on a dinner date with her husband.

Tip for success: “Take time off. Spend time with your family. Spend time with friends,” Ashley advises. “Learn to say no to clients, even though that’s like, the hardest thing ever to do. You have to learn to do that, because if you’re not happy, it’s going to show in your business and it’s going to show to your clients.”

The road to operating her professional pet-sitting service took a lot of turns, but it led Ashley home again.

When she was young, a neighbor who traveled a lot would have her care for her pets. Now this woman is still her client almost 20 years later as Ashley cares for pets in a professional capacity.

“I just love that—that it kind of came full circle,” Ashley says. ■