



No bark, no bite, no problem

By: Ronnie Wright, Editor
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Annabelle, a year-old golden retriever, didn't have an easy go of it as a puppy. Owner Judy Irwin, of Milford, said the dog acquired double pneumonia and spent a good deal of her youth in hospitals and shelters, developing separation anxiety which complicated what Irwin described as the dog's "dominant female" personality.

As she grew older, Irwin said Annabelle would bark incessantly as Irwin left the house, would snatch at Irwin's pocketbook or earrings, and would destroy items around the house while she was gone, traits that many dog owners are all too familiar with.

In worst-case scenarios, problem dogs often end up back at shelters or sometimes put to sleep when other solutions aren't available.

Enter Bark Busters, the world's largest home dog training business whose motto is "Happy dogs = Happy families." Founded in Australia in the late 1980s, a New Haven County franchise opened last fall by Richard and Vicki Horowitz, whose mission is to provide the means for all family members to live peacefully together, particular with troublesome but otherwise lovable canines.

Bark Busters use non-harsh, easy-to-learn methods of "canine communication" including voice control, body language and "pack leadership" mentality. All training is conducted in the client's home, takes about two hours for most dogs, and the client pays only once while trainers return as needed forever, wherever, as the company is franchised throughout the United States.

In actuality, training is more for dog owners than for the pets themselves.

"Owners have to be willing to put effort into it," said Vicki. "We're not training the dog so much as training the owner to maintain rules. We can't make that commitment for them. They have to make that choice."

The couple, who were dog owners for more than 25 years before opening a Bark Busters franchise, said a common misperception is that some breeds of dogs are more difficult to train than others, but more than anything, disinterested dog owners contribute to adverse behavior.

Part of the Bark Busters method is to communicate with the animals on their level, in this case as if the household were a dog pack, which always has a leader. Richard said it's very important for dog owners, from the onset, to establish and maintain leadership consistently.

Part of communicating, the couple said, is using different tones as dogs would understand them in the wild, utilizing a tone of "Bah!" when the dog is not complying with the owner's wishes, equivalent to a growl in the wild, and giving a soft, higher-toned word of encouragement and praise when the dog is complying with commands.

"There's nothing physical involved," said Richard. "It's all very humane."

"The correction part is easy," added Vicki, "but telling the dog what you want and praising them for it, that's harder to be consistent with."

When the couple first met Irwin and Annabelle, they said the dog suffered from major separation anxiety, and would bolt toward the door, bark, and jump over furniture. Irwin was in tears, frustrated by not knowing what to do to improve the situation but exasperated by the prospect of possibly giving up on Annabelle.

As these are common-enough problems in many households, the Horowitz's said training is tailor-made to each family based on what they want and don't want, which also makes for a creative approach and a job that never gets boring.

"When we first go into a home, we observe the family dynamic, get information and discuss what the problems are as well as the rules of the house," said Vicki. "Every household we go into is different and the

problems unique, so it gives us the opportunity to be creative on the spot.

"It's very rewarding because you often see changes that day," Vicki continued, "and you see the reactions of the families, which is rewarding in itself."

"We've been having a lot of fun," said Richard.

During one training session, Richard and Vicki worked with Irwin on training Annabelle to ignore distractions and give focused attention to Irwin. As she walked Annabelle around the backyard, Irwin would suddenly change direction, a practice to see if Annabelle would promptly respond while still looking up at Irwin. She did, even staying put at one point as Irwin walked around the dog and away from her.

"When we first started this, 'stay' was impossible," said Irwin. "One of the things that is really special about the Horowitz's is that they're always encouraging. They're lovely people, very positive, and there's never an unkind word to me or Annabelle."

Irwin said she practices with Annabelle about 10 to 15 minutes a day, an extremely important follow-up to the in-home training they receive. After a month of training, Irwin said Annabelle's problems have noticeably decreased.

And if she moves, or if another pet is introduced into the house, or if other problems develop, training is guaranteed for the life of the original pet at no additional cost.

The Horowitz's noted that pet owners should also be realistic when it comes to meeting goals.

The potential rewards for training in the Bark Busters method help not only dog owners and their families, but also the community at large as fewer dogs would potentially have to be put down after being returned to animal shelters or abused and neglected by frustrated owners, as well as decreasing possible disputes between neighbors over unruly dogs.

"Unfortunately, we've seen a few clients or have heard of people that had to return dogs because they couldn't handle them," said Dina Renda, an office manager at Baybrook Animal Hospital, who recommended Irwin to Bark Busters. "On the one hand, it's responsible if they think that's the best thing to do. But there are alternatives. Training and behavior modification is a good way to go.

"We have been working with Annabelle since she was a puppy," Reid continued. "We knew how sweet she was and understood the frustration. We didn't want [Judy] to have to give up on Annabelle. And I know she's very happy with the way things are going."

"I'd like to thank my neighbors, the Olszewskis and Batmans, for their graciousness when Annabelle acted like Harry Houdini and escaped," said Irwin. "They've been very kind to me."

Bark Busters brochures are available at most vet offices, pet groomers, pet stores and animal shelters. For more information call the Horowitz's at (203) 687-0480 or visit the Web site www.barkbusters.com. The company gives discounts to those who adopt dogs from animal shelters.