

it's a dog's life em

A flash of those sad puppy dog eyes every time Jenny Brearley left her pet pooch to travel eventually led to Don't Fret Pet – a business destined to keep tails wagging.

BY JANNE APELGREN PHOTOGRAPHY RUSSELL SHAKESPEARE

★ **JENNY BREARLEY'S FIRST BABY** weighed 32 kilos and slept at the end of her bed. She was also the inspiration for Jenny to go into business, because baby Sophie – a Rhodesian ridgeback puppy – hated it when Jenny went away. So did Jenny.

It was while chatting with other dog lovers at a local park in the early 1990s that Jenny discovered most owners were worried about leaving their pets when they travelled. Born from this was Jenny's idea for a service where dogs were boarded in another family's home, rather than in a kennel.

"For me, going away was always a problem," says Jenny, who was working in computing when she got Sophie in 1990. "I'd used kennels, but Sophie didn't like those environments – she was used to sitting on the couch and going for walks. I found a lot of people felt the same way about putting their dogs in kennels."

So Jenny put together a questionnaire and dropped it into the letterboxes of her neighbours to find out if they'd use a dog-sitting service and what they'd be prepared to pay for it. The response was positive, and even though she had limited capital, Jenny hired a public relations company, had business cards, a letterhead and media release printed, and started Don't Fret Pet.

Jenny put her own computer skills to work to create a computer system and website for the business. Then she advertised for dog minders and visited applicants' homes to check their fences and credentials. (Between a fifth and a quarter of the \$25–\$35 daily boarding fee goes to the minder. The remainder goes towards staffing, marketing and the high, but necessary, insurance costs.)

By Christmas 1993 Jenny had signed up 10 minders and taken her first client, a German shepherd-cross whose owner was travelling interstate. When dog

owners kept coming back to Don't Fret Pet, Jenny knew she had a winning venture on her hands.

The youngest of three girls, Jenny grew up in Epping, on Melbourne's northern fringe. She went travelling after leaving school and spent most of the 1980s living and working overseas.

She stumbled into computing as a career after taking an aptitude test and getting on-the-job training. Yet while computers brought her a high salary and plenty of job opportunities around the world, Jenny found little pleasure in her work. After a move to Sydney, she took a life management course, where she was encouraged to develop and identify a path in life and work that expressed her passions, values and priorities.

"My passions were travel and eating, but I couldn't see how to make money out of those," Jenny smiles.

Then she began her business. That first Christmas, Don't Fret Pet didn't bring in a lot of money, so Jenny held on to her part-time job as a sales representative.

When a business consultant advised she would have to devote herself full-time to the business to succeed, she wasn't sure about making the big leap.

"It was hard because I wasn't making enough to pay rent at the time. But when I did go full-time with Don't Fret Pet, the money started to come in," she recalls.

Soon Jenny was receiving inquiries from dog owners all over Sydney. Happy customers, vets and even local papers were sending her business. More importantly, after 18 years in the computer field, Jenny now felt more fulfilled by what she was doing than she had at any other time in her life.

"I was absolutely loving the work," says Jenny. "I was educating myself, reading lots of books about business, doing courses and working long hours."

Despite the hours, Jenny also found time to get married in 1997, move to Queensland in 1998 and have her daughter, Hannah, in 1999 – the same year Don't Fret Pet took on its ►

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*becoming
a minder*

Don't Fret Pet has more than 500 minders throughout Australia. They're paid \$6 per night per dog. Requirements include a securely fenced yard. Half the minders are families, about a third are seniors, and many are teenagers boosting pocket money.

"Mums let their kids do it because they say it's safer than a paper run," says Jenny.

Certain minders work occasionally, others 320 nights a year, but all are dog lovers. Jennifer Thompson, 43, an executive assistant from Brisbane, started out using the service as a client, then became a minder.

"I do it for my dog, Max," she says. "I enjoy having a friend for him here."

first franchisee, Sophie Rowe, in Sydney's Sutherland. Fortunately, Sophie was able to run the business while Jenny gave birth, but Jenny was back in the office just 10 days later.

Testing times followed when different goals and priorities caused Jenny's marriage to break down. "Hannah was only one at the time," recalls Jenny. "It was a very difficult decision, because I didn't want to be a single parent raising a child."

To help with caring for her baby daughter while she ran her business, Jenny chose family day care. "I felt Hannah was going to get one-on-one care that way," says Jenny. "We had a brilliant family day care mum."

Jenny and Hannah now live in Yandina, on the Queensland Sunshine Coast hinterland, where Hannah goes to a local Montessori school and spends every second weekend with her father in Brisbane.

Despite her Melbourne heritage, Jenny is happy to make Queensland home, particularly for its climate. She also chose this area because it's green and hilly and not as busy as the coast. "I like living in a small community again and raising a child here," she says.

"I don't have time for a new partner and I really don't get out much," laughs Jenny. Top of her wish list is a holiday where she can lie back and read historical fiction all day.

Now, with 12 franchisees in four states and the ACT, Jenny has little time for anything except her business and daughter. "I don't have time for a new partner and I really don't get out much," she laughs.

As with any business, there've been setbacks: one franchise deal that went sour cost Jenny money and clients, as well as proving incredibly stressful. "I have always believed you have to look after your customers," she says, a philosophy she developed as a girl helping out in her mother's milk bar.

And, as a dog lover, it is always devastating to Jenny when one of her former four-legged clients becomes ill or dies. She still feels upset about three such deaths — one by euthanasia, another in an accident and the third from illness. But, inevitably, it was the passing of her own "baby", Sophie, that caused the most pain. "I bawled when she had to be put down at the age of 13," says Jenny.

Now on the top of Jenny's wish list is a holiday somewhere warm, where she can lie back and read her favourite historical fiction all day. With her business as successful and busy as it is at the moment, however, Jenny cheerily admits that's not going to happen for quite a while. ■



all about jenny

WHO: Jenny Bivarley, 48.
LIVES: Yandina, on Queensland's Sunshine Coast hinterland, with daughter Hannah, six, and Ebony, a 13-year-old labrador-rottweiler-cross and former "client" whose owner had to find her a new home after joining the Royal Flying Doctor Service as a nurse.
BUSINESS: Founded in 1993, Don't Fret Pet pairs dog owners and home-based sitters, so dogs board in a domestic environment, rather than kennels, when their owners are away. Boarding costs \$25-\$35 a day, food not included. Call 1300 307 221 or visit www.dontfretpet.com.au.

