

## PET CETERA

# Some People Just Love Working On Pet Projects

By KRISTEN LEVINE  
Tribune correspondent

Many pet lovers dream of working with animals one day. Some give up secure corporate jobs to chase that dream.

After 15 years in the corporate telecom industry, Mary Birrell was a frustrated, unfulfilled middle manager.

"I wasn't enjoying the work anymore and felt like all I was contributing to was a big company's bottom line," she says.

She loved dogs, and she longed for a career that would make a difference in people's lives. In 2003, Birrell took a leap of faith and bought a Bark Busters Home Dog Training franchise in Lutz.

"It was a perfect match for me because the company's mission is to help dogs and their owners with various behavior issues and to keep more dogs in their homes instead of giving them up [to shelters] due to behavior," she says. "It's the best job in the world for me!"

People who work in a pet-related field are happier than most, says Richard Thompson, founder of Zootoo.com and former "top cat" (CEO) at Meow Mix. "The pet industry is one with a lot of emotion, a lot of passion and a lot of growth. There are just a lot of people that really, really love what they're doing."

Pets inspired Tera Hamby's pet-related business. But sur-

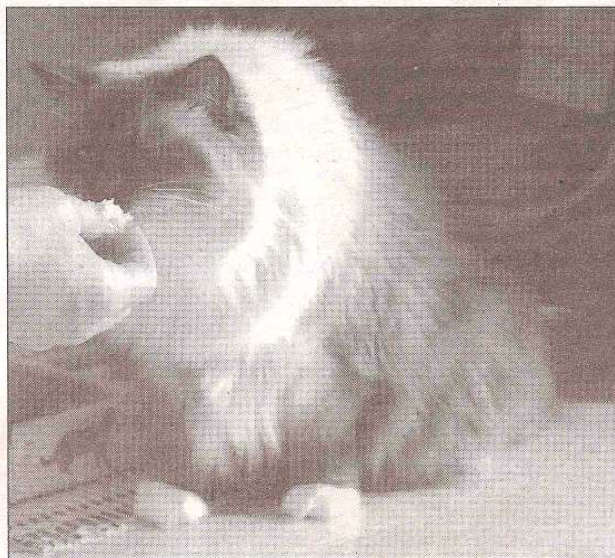


Photo by TERA HAMBY

**Tera Hamby uses her ragdoll cats and chihuahuas as testers for the treats she sells in gift baskets through her Internet business.**

rescue. "The doctors I saw assumed

giving a serious illness provided the motivation. "Before I started the business, I always thought of it as a daydream job," says Hamby, owner of Pampered Paw Gifts in Zephyrhills.

During her late 20s while working as a property manager in Brandon, she struggled with bouts of excruciating pain that left her unable to walk. She visited doctors for a couple of years, seeking a diagnosis.

"The doctors I saw assumed

I was healthy because I was young," she says.

A co-worker referred her to a specialist and, at 31, Hamby was diagnosed with uterine cancer, stage 1-B, endometriosis and adenomyosis.

"Laying there sick in a hospital bed, I asked myself, 'If I get through this, what do I want to do with the rest of my life?'"

She had always dreamed of starting her own pet business. She had a reputation for pulling together great gift baskets

## CRITTER CALENDAR

### Art Of Rescue

An art show featuring local artists, live and silent auctions, cocktails and hors d'oeuvres will raise money for Florida Boxer Rescue. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Saturday, and the event gears up at 6:30 p.m. at the Art Institute of Tampa, 4401 N. Himes Ave.

Tickets are \$20 in advance through PayPal from [www.flbr.org](http://www.flbr.org) or \$25 at the door.

### Calling All Cover Cats

Your cat could be the monthly pinup, or the cover, of Feline Folks' 2009 calendar, which benefits low-cost spay and neuter for homeless cats. Winners get their photo published with their name, plus a free calendar.

By Aug. 31, send a photo that shows only a cat (or cats) — no dogs, no people and no text — to [info@felinefolks.org](mailto:info@felinefolks.org). It must be a digital file, 300 dpi, 8 by 11 inches, 95 percent quality jpeg and less than 32 MB. People can enter more than once and should include their cat's name, if it's a pet, and contact information.

for people, yet a huge heart for animals, too — especially those in need. She wanted to create gift baskets that both people and pets would love, while generating enough income to allow her to donate a percentage of proceeds to pet

rescues.

Hamby even purchased a domain name in 2004 for her "someday job," but she did little more than dream about the potential. "I would think about how much fun it would be, but then I'd push it out of my head."

Three years after her diagnosis, Hamby is cancer-free and has lost 95 pounds — putting her at a healthy weight and mind-set. She officially launched Pampered Paw Gifts online last year at [www.pamperedpawgifts.com](http://www.pamperedpawgifts.com).

"Illness taught me to get serious and to take chances. Don't wait — that's for sure."

Her gift line for dogs and cats includes toys, treats, birthday cakes, truffles and even memorial gifts. Recently, she created two baskets that benefit the Florida boxer rescue group.

"The baskets are all inspired by my customers' special requests," Hamby says. "My eyes tear up with joy when e-mails, letters and pictures come in from happy customers. It's such a reward and the reason that I truly love what I do."

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