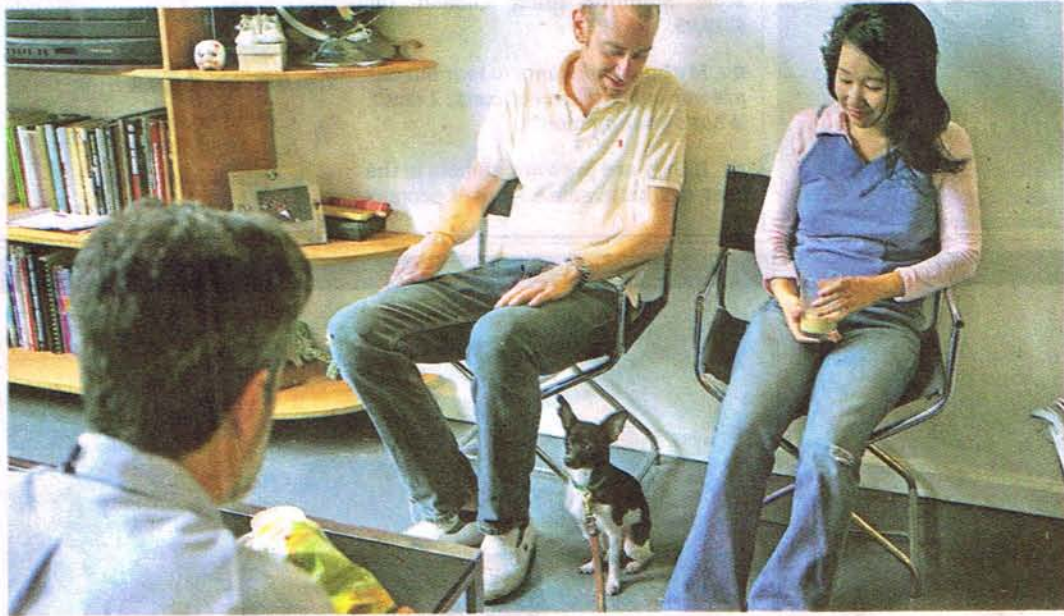


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Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

IN THE DOG'S HOUSE Bill Berloni, left, an animal behaviorist, in a Brooklyn loft with Ryan Dixon, Arisa Itami and Stanley, an adopted Chihuahua with nervous habits.

Nerves as Frayed as the Sofa? Call Your Own Dog Whisperer

By **ARIANNE COHEN**

SOMETIMES Bill Berloni feels like a phone psychic. "People call about their adopted pets, and I've never seen their home," he said. "One woman had a dog who was afraid of thunder, and neglected to mention that she lived next to an airport."

For this reason, Mr. Berloni, an animal behaviorist and well-known Broadway animal trainer (he is currently prepping four dogs for the opening of "Legally Blonde" in April) prefers to make house calls. On a recent afternoon, he visited Stanley, a skittish, do-eyed Chihuahua, in a loft in downtown Brooklyn. "This is a nice calm space, with lots of light," Mr. Berloni said. "It's not too big, and the street noise isn't too loud. Good."

Stanley growled, ran into the living room and urinated on the couch.

Mr. Berloni took this as a positive sign: "He's not freaking out. He hasn't left the room. He's checking us out."

The urination? "That was submission urination," he said: a sign of Stanley's excitement.

Mr. Berloni is typical of a growing number of trainers around the country in his insistence on house calls. Home visits have increased steeply in recent years, particularly in cities, where apartment dwellers struggle with pet conflicts in cramped quarters and without backyard space.

"In the last two years, my clients want home service, and they're willing to pay for it," said David Roos, the owner of Perfect Paws Dog Training Academy in San Francisco. "It allows very intense educating and focus, and the results come much easier and quicker, which is exactly what busy people want."

Brian Kilcommons, a trainer based in Auburn, N.H., and a faculty member at the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in North Grafton, Mass., has found the same demand in rural New England. "Home pet services have just expanded consid-

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erably, and many good trainers are fully booked with house calls," he said.

The house-call boom is part of a general expansion of the "pet services" sector of the \$38 billion pet industry. Spending in that category swelled to \$2.7 billion in 2006, for services like training, grooming and boarding, up from \$1.2 billion five years earlier, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association.

Service does not come cheap; fees range from \$100 to \$500 an hour, according to several trainers.

The fashion for house calls is being driven in part by Cesar Millan, a.k.a. the Dog Whisperer, whose weekly show by that name on the National Geographic Channel has inspired millions of viewers to consider that they, too, could hire someone to bring their pets to heel in their own homes. The show, which follows Mr. Millan as he visits and tames out-of-control dogs, amounts to an advertisement for dog training house calls.

Rising animal adoption rates, a result of shelters enacting "no-kill" policies and focusing instead on promoting adoption, have also contributed to the increase. (At Animal Care and Control of New York City, adoptions have more than doubled since 2001, to 19,314 in 2006.)

As Mr. Berloni put it, "Rescued pets often come with baggage."

Baggage like Stanley's, for example. In June, he was transported by police officers to the Humane Society of New York in Manhattan after a two-car accident left him with a broken hind leg, broken ribs, a head wound, bodily abrasions and patches of alopecia. He underwent leg surgery, and after being fitted with a leg cast he was transferred to the cat floor because of his fear of other dogs.

Nonetheless, Arisa Itami, 33, a jazz singer from Japan, found him "cute and amazing," and adopted him.

"I think a larger dog would've been fine," noted her husband, Ryan Dixon, a photographer.

As part of its adoption program, the Humane Society offers free house calls, and the agency sent its director of behavior, Mr. Berloni, to assist Stanley and his new owners. During Mr. Berloni's visit, the couple eagerly listed Stanley's troubles: stealing food when Mr. Dixon eats on the couch; post-traumatic stress resulting from the car accident; and his unpredictable excretion habits, which sparked a lively discussion.

"And he's distracted, kind of out of focus," Ms. Itami said. "He can't walk straight. He's always looking around." ("I think that's normal," Mr. Dixon said. "No," replied Ms. Itami.)

Mr. Berloni nodded. A compact man with dark eyes and an air of rigid calm, he conducted the apartment analysis from Stanley's point of view. "You eat on a low couch, down on his level, so he thinks you're invit-



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

HOUSEBREAKING David Roos, a trainer in San Francisco, with the Wentker family and their dog, TJ, above; top, Mr. Berloni with Stanley and his frustrated owners.

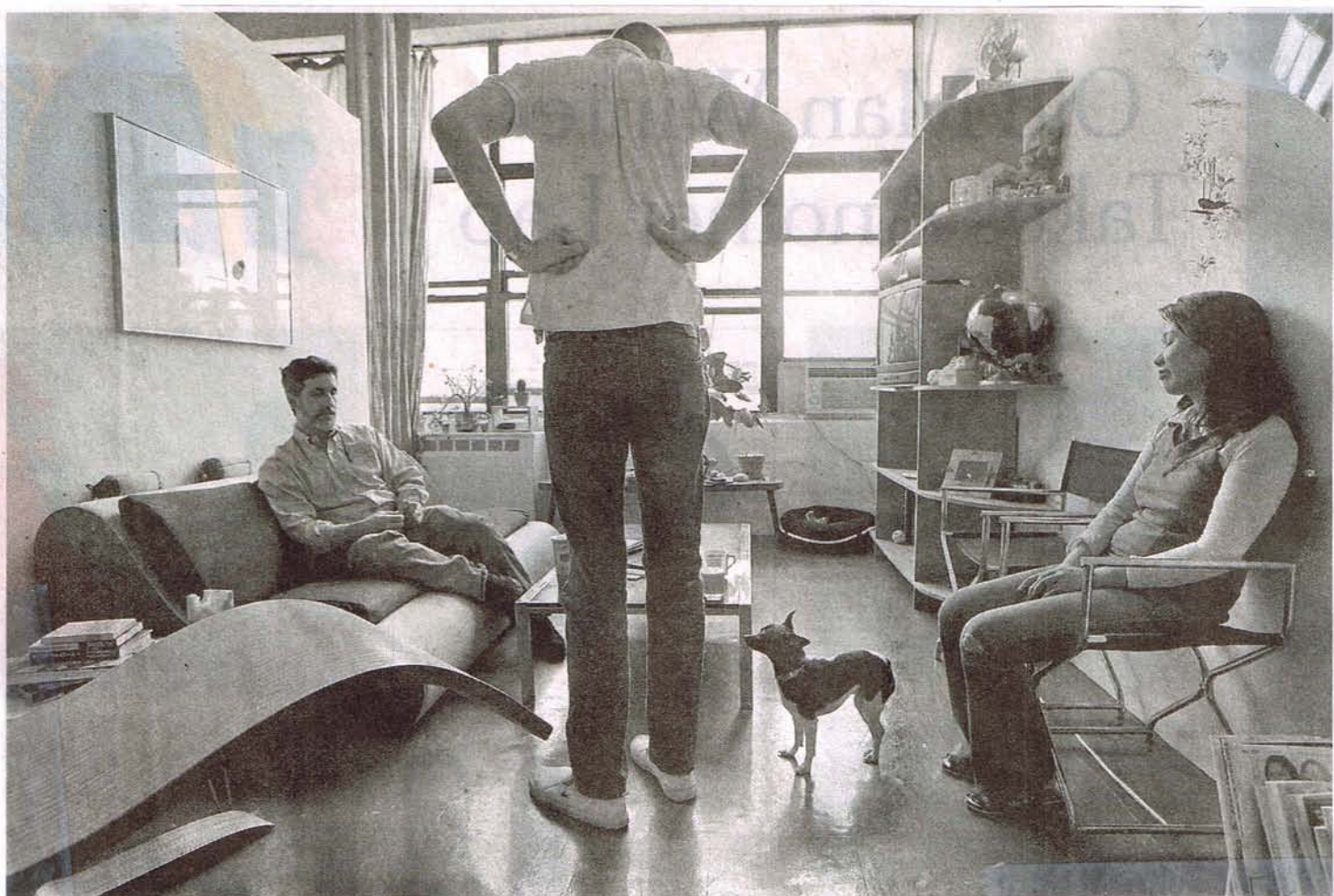
More adoptions from shelters mean more pets with emotional baggage.

ing him in," he said to Mr. Dixon. The solution: set aside a corner of the room for a new dog bed, where Stanley can eat treats during mealtime.

Mr. Berloni eyed a newspaper that the couple had set out for Stanley's use in the center of the apartment, in hopes of preventing more damage to their furnishings. The paper was relocated to the bathroom, where Stanley would feel "less prone to predators," Mr. Berloni said.

Stanley looked bored. He gave Mr. Berloni a blasé glance, and groomed a patch of his alopecia.

It's hard to overstate how disruptive a misbehaved pet can be to a household. Problems like lack of housebreaking and chewing can fray nerves and sofas alike, and a



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

pet's hostility toward male guests can even destroy relationships. "Friends of mine call me a dog trainer slash marriage counselor," Mr. Roos said. "People will say: When my boyfriend and I are having sex, the dog is ready to attack my boyfriend."

Aggressive dogs in particular can isolate owners. Mr. Kilcommons, the New Hampshire trainer, worked with a Virginia woman whose Rottweiler guarded doorways, barring visitors from entering the house, and then began taunting gardeners. "The dog would wait until the gardener bent over, and then stick his head between his legs and roar, then walk away," he said. "People wouldn't work for her."

For decades, frustrated pet owners had two options: Obedience classes or private office appointments, said Jean Donaldson, director of the San Francisco S.P.C.A. Academy for Dog Trainers.

"The problem is that dogs were likely to go home and regress to the old rules," Ms. Donaldson said. Home training, which is "efficient and customizable" to the point where some trainers will visit while a pet's owner is at work, leaving behind a list of training exercises, she said, is more likely to encourage long-term change.

"A huge part of managing your pet is managing the environment," said Andrea Arden, who runs Andrea Arden Dog Training, a 12-year-old Manhattan firm that performs 60 house calls a week, twice as many as it did three years ago.

Ms. Arden met a dachshund in a Park Avenue apartment recently who barked so much, "it was actually the building manager who called me," she said. She and the owner created a space for the dog on one side of the apartment, away from bustling hallways, and turned on a television to drown out the noise the dog was responding to. (Ms. Arden also puppy-proofs rooms, fitting kitchen moldings with rubber bumpers and rendering garbage pails inaccessible.)

Dogs are not the only animals receiving house calls. Dr. Peter Borchelt, an animal behaviorist in Brooklyn who began performing house calls in 1978, said that half his clients are cats, many with aggression and grooming problems. One cat hid under the kitchen cabinets whenever the owner's new boyfriend would visit, he said, adding that the cat began to stress-groom wounds into its back. Dr. Borchelt instructed the boyfriend to pretend he was afraid of the cat, and the owner to create a safe, boyfriend-free space in the apartment.

In many cases, what seem like complex and hopeless problems to pet owners can be resolved in one or two house calls from an experienced trainer, according to most of those interviewed. Mr. Berloni, for example, provided Stanley's owners with only an hour of customized education.

"Stanley seems happier," Mr. Dixon said a few weeks later. "And it was so useful to have someone in our own space telling us what we were doing wrong, since Stanley can't talk."