

# Member Profile

Editor Nicole Wilde, CPDT



**Elena Gretch,  
CPDT-KA**

Elena and Diver (L) and Splash (R)

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**Years in Business:** Five

**Personal Training Philosophy:** Training should influence our actions, define our choices, and help to create boundaries—all essential components of healthy and long-lasting canine/human relationships.

## How long have you been in business and what types of services do you provide?

It's A Dog's Life NY is a pet care company that has been in business for five years, integrating the values of positive reinforcement training into all of our services. We offer individual training sessions with a specialty in Urban Dog Development, a training program I have designed that addresses the unique issues facing urban dogs and their owners. Topics are diverse, with a strong focus on socialization, habituation, and leash skills. My clients also rely on my team of dog walkers and pet sitters to help with the "homework". Through a full array of pet services including dog walking, pet sitting and in-home boarding, we can support the healthy development in our canine clients and boost the training and rehabilitation process.

Initially founded as a training service, I quickly learned that our clients needed more than just a good trainer. They required services that supported the same philosophies, and could help with their dogs' development. I created a strong team of pet care specialists to work individually with canine clients on a consistent basis. These specialists are trained in the fundamentals of positive reinforcement and are required to attend training sessions and do self-study. This team approach is integral to our high success rate with dogs of all types including difficult rescue cases with histories of fear and aggression.

I spend significant time researching the best ways to keep our pups safe, healthy, and happy. By promoting responsible ownership and stricter guidelines, our dogs can become better accepted into American society. It's A Dog's Life NY offers training and walking services to rescue groups and shelters directly and through NYC Mayor's Alliance. We volunteer pet services to home bound seniors through JASA's Pets Project and work locally with elementary schools to teach children about safe ways to play and interact with our canine friends. I am a CGC Evaluator and work with local Therapy Dog Programs to introduce Dog/Handler Teams for therapy-assisted work.

## How did you get started?

I grew up with two small, untrained family dogs in a suburban environment. They would bark, jump, and run for the hills anytime someone opened the door and on the occasional trip to the city, were especially problematic. I learned right away that a city dog had unique challenges and required different levels of manners, socialization, and obedience. When it was time to get my own dog, I was overwhelmed by the pressure and responsibility. My pup was going to grow up to be 50+ pounds and I was insistent that she become the epitome of trained perfection. I read all of the books my breeder suggested but nothing prepared me for the nightmare that was my Portuguese Water Dog puppy. I found myself motivated by this challenge and inspired by its possibilities. I took a break from my Wall Street career and explored a new direction. I set out to learn as much as I could, attending workshops and events to supplement my academic education and worked closely with trainers doing behavior modification on rescues for first-hand experience. I applied my skills at home and eventually my "devil-dog" became my beautifully trained canine assistant, recently featured with me on CNN's Larry King Live.

## How do you get your business?

Our business comes from a variety of sources, the majority being client and vet referrals. We also get dog walking and pet sitting referrals from other trainers because of our good reputation. The balance comes from online listings and directories. Review sites are becoming very popular, so I encourage clients to share their experiences.

## What do you believe are the three most important things to teach a dog?

Socialization, Stay, and Recall in that order. In NYC, we have strict leash laws. However, on an average walk, we encounter numerous dogs, children, and people. Everything is in close proximity on a crowded sidewalk so it is essential that our dogs learn to accept these interactions as normal occurrences. Stay is extremely important and can be used ➤

even while on leash. It is an essential step in teaching a pup to relax. We train and practice this skill at traffic lights, in building lobbies, and elevators. I believe that the Recall is an important skill regardless of where you live because it is an absolute lifesaver! We often hear stories about dogs that break free of their leashes and run into traffic, a tragedy that can be completely avoided by honing an excellent recall.

### What types of cases do you find most challenging and why? What techniques or philosophies have you found helpful in dealing with those cases?

My most challenging cases are the ones that involve work beyond the obvious capacity of the owner. This happens frequently as new dog owners underestimate the needs of their puppy or rescue. Even with clearly communicated lessons, dog training requires an attention span that can exceed the owner's ability. Clients often have trouble staying focused during sessions due to a myriad of distractions. These busy families have a hard time being accountable for a dog's behavior and have difficulties following through with lessons and homework. In these cases, I try to cover as much material as possible in the shortest time period and encourage the bonding process so families remain dedicated to the dog. I also offer additional follow-up and practice through dog walking and sitting services.

### What advice would you give other trainers about working with dogs and their owners?

Dog training is problem solving. Issues cannot always be resolved by following prescribed rules. I rely on a strong working knowledge of the fundamentals but sometimes step back, reassess and try it from a different angle. Recently, I worked with a dog that started demonstrating symptoms of separation anxiety. After a few sessions, we added a nanny camera and realized the dog was responding to nearby construction noises.

Get to know your clients! Exchange enough information prior to your first meeting so you know what to expect when you walk through the door. Find out your client's age range, profession, family status, etc. This will allow you to properly tailor your lesson plans for maximum effectiveness. When working with kids, I try to talk less and utilize more games, as it's natural for children to practice training when it's fun. When working with older adults, I focus on verbal explanations and theory while I do the majority of the shaping.

### Can you offer a specific tip or trick for working with dogs or owners that other trainers might find helpful?

Include tips on canine health in your regular lessons. I like to teach basic hygiene skills such as ear cleaning and teeth brushing as these are important extensions of training and support the well-being of our dogs.

### What would you say are the top three things you have personally learned as a trainer?

I have learned so much about myself in these last few years. Prior to working with dogs, my life was less fulfilling. While successful in my previous career, the benefits were never equivalent to the sacrifices. Now, I get to give back! I find empowerment in my role as trainer, teacher, mentor, and animal advocate. I immerse myself in animals and share my energy, passion, and love with all those around me.

It is hard to run a business! Sometimes, I feel like the dogs are the easy part. Get a mentor, join a group, and find some support. I recently joined an Entrepreneurs' Organization Program to help me gain more tools and skills to grow my business.

"Stay committed to your decision, but stay flexible in your approach." Tom Robbins said it best with this timeless quote. I am learning to adjust to the challenges and tribulations of my life and career. Work can be exhausting but I always try to remember the furry faces that warm my heart and enrich my life.

### What was the last training-related seminar you attended?

I attended the APDT Conference in Louisville, KY, where I found Patricia McConnell's presentation on play behavior to be of particular interest.

I just finished reading *Control Unleashed* by Leslie McDevitt. I perform the majority of my training inside or on-leash due to local laws so I really enjoyed learning new techniques for off-leash work.

I am registered to attend Karen Overall's seminar on Pharmacological Treatment for Troubled Canines. Drug treatment is becoming more prevalent in the treatment of canine behavioral problems and I want to have a better understanding of the how these drugs work and the risks involved.

"Member Profile" editor Nicole Wilde, CPDT, is the author of eight books including **So You Want to be a Dog Trainer, Help for Your Fearful Dog, Getting a Grip on Aggression Cases**, and the 2009 release **Energy Healing for Dogs** (all available at [www.phantompub.com](http://www.phantompub.com)). Nicole presents seminars domestically and internationally, and is on the faculty and advisory board of the Companion Animal Sciences Institute. She is a columnist for **Modern Dog Magazine**, a regular contributor to *Dog Star Daily* ([www.dogstardaily.com](http://www.dogstardaily.com)), and the owner of *Gentle Guidance Dog Training* in southern California.

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