

PORTSMOUTH

CITY LIFESTYLE™



*The Kids &
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inside *the issue*

AUGUST 2025 | KIDS & PETS



Featured

- 12** **Paws and Podiums**
Carol Kelly's prize-winning, four-footed friends showcase how talent plus training bring home trophies
- 16** **The Valuable, Versatile ADU**
Realtor Jenn Madden explains the ins and outs of accessory dwelling units
- 20** **It's All in the Details**
Mountain View Grand Resort & Spa makes traveling with kids and pets easy
- 30** **The Courage Within**
On Belay's adventure programs provide support and empowerment for kids dealing with a loved one's cancer

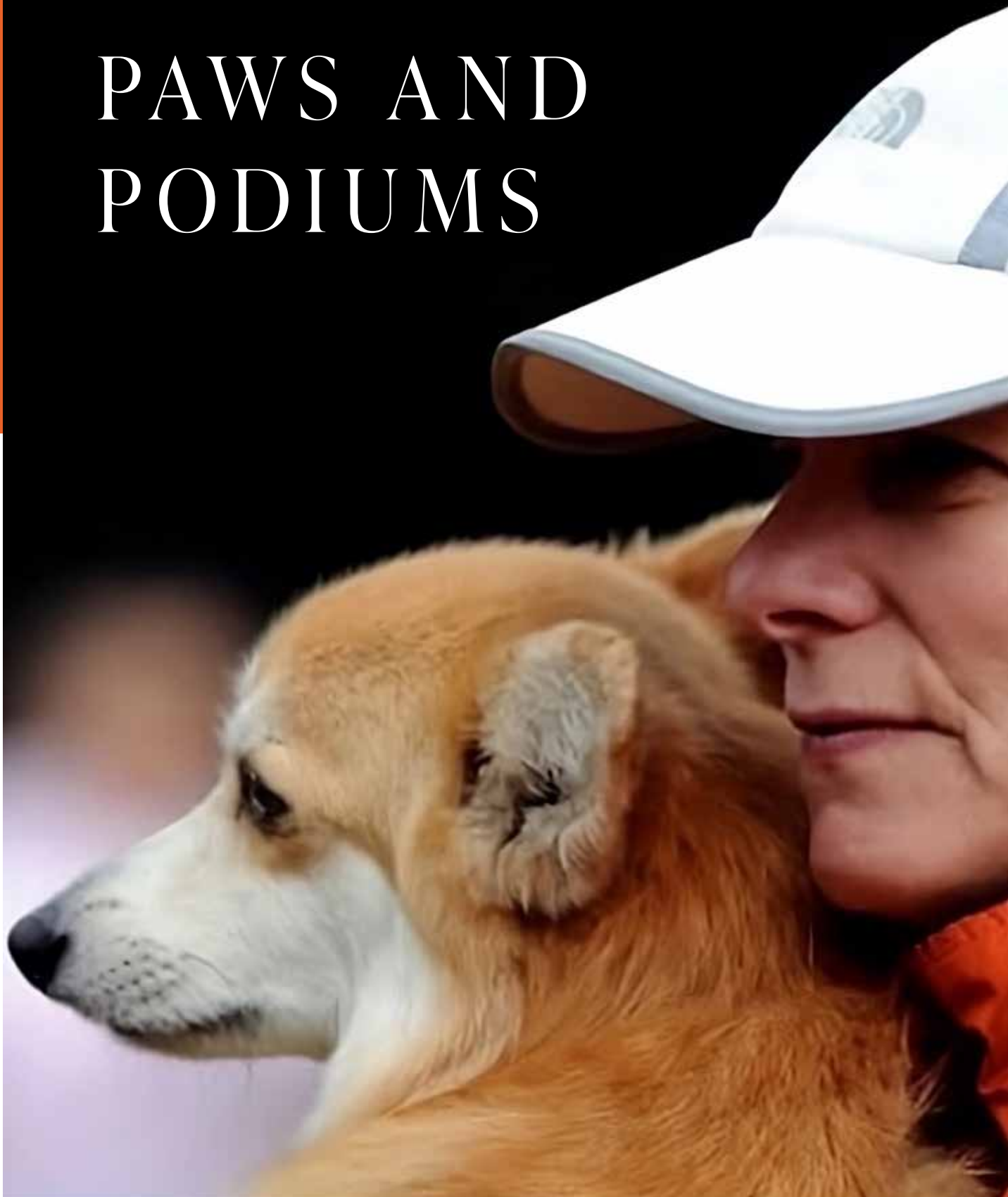
On the Cover

Experience breathtaking views at Mountain View Grand Resort and Spa in Whitefield, NH. This family- and pet-friendly destination offers a delightful getaway for families year-round, as Beatrix and Finnegan can certainly attest.

Departments

- 4** Lifestyle Letter
- 8** City Scene
- 12** Pet Care LIFE + CULTURE
- 16** Local Limelight REAL ESTATE
- 20** Road Trip TRAVEL
- 26** Education Corner EDUCATION
- 30** Inspired By HEALTH + WELLNESS
- 34** Events

PAWS AND PODIUMS



ARTICLE BY ANN KATHRYN KELLY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROL KELLY



CAROL KELLY'S PRIZE-WINNING, FOUR-FOOTED
FRIENDS SHOWCASE HOW TALENT PLUS TRAINING
BRING HOME TROPHIES

"Sit. Stay." Table-stakes commands for most dog owners.

But in the world of competitive dog shows, the road from sit and stay to tail-wagging triumph starts long before the lights go up, the judges judge, the cameras click, and top dogs are announced. Just ask Portsmouth resident and prize-winning handler Carol Kelly, who has more than a decade-long history with dog show winners and everything that goes into their victories.

Kelly's Corgi, Lily—her first winning competitor—clinched 15 AKC (American Kennel Club) Masters Agility Champion (MACH) titles back to back before she passed away at age 15 in 2019. Since then, Kelly has welcomed four more dogs into her home and heart: Pilot, a Sheltie that passed last year at age 15; Pinto, a 12-year-old Border Collie and retired agility competitor; Pickwick, an 8-year-old Papillon and retired MACH; and Purchase, a 5-year-old Papillon and her current competitor and MACH.

Kelly explains that to excel in competition, dogs must be more than physically fit and fine tuned through training. Mental readiness is just as important, with a dog's "ring confidence" often built through time, exposure, and repetition. For more than 10 years, Kelly and her dogs have trained with Laura Dolan, a national- and world-champion agility trainer with American K9 Country in Amherst, New Hampshire. Kelly also travels to Uxbridge, Massachusetts, twice a month to train Purchase with AKC World Team coach, John Nys, at his Agility Rush K9 Performance Center.

For agility competitions—the type Kelly and her dogs compete in—Kelly emphasizes the importance of safe training to handle the physical exertion and elaborate obstacles that include weave poles, tunnels, see-saws, A-frames, and hoop jumps. Best practice is to wait until dogs have matured—at least to a year to 18

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months—before beginning rigorous training, but younger dogs can learn many agility fundamentals that do not strain them.

One could easily assume, given her passion for the sport, that Kelly grew up with dogs in her home. “Believe it or not, I didn’t,” she says with a laugh. “We had cats. But I’ve always loved dogs, and as a kid I asked my neighbors all the time if I could walk theirs.”

Kelly moved from Madison, Wisconsin, to Portsmouth 30 years ago. Early on, she showed several Golden Retrievers at obedience competitions. But it was when she got Lily almost 18 years ago that she shifted her goals from pursuing competitions in obedience to those in agility. “Lily was a natural,” Kelly remembers. “I could see it and feel it. She was what the industry calls ‘biddable’—meaning, she was extremely easy to work with and followed commands right off the bat.”

Smart, athletic, sweet-tempered, and just 16 pounds, Lily was widely considered a phenom on the competition circuit. She swept one title after another, competing in AKC Invitationals and Nationals across the country. She was named the number-one AKC Agility Corgi in 2011.

Kelly is riding a new wave with her current top dog, Purchase, standing 10.5 inches tall at his withers (the height measured at a dog’s shoulder blades). Purchase competes in the small dog category, with agility height divisions running from eight to 24 inches, in four-inch increments. Within each division, a number of breeds can compete as long as they meet specified height requirements. Dogs must also be at least 15 months old to compete in AKC agility shows.

Purchase won the eight-inch division agility championship at Westminster in Flushing, New York, in 2023—a thrilling achievement. Kelly’s petite powerhouse Papillon also went the distance to earn the blue ribbon and bragging rights in his division.

Kelly says her greatest reward is the bond formed with her dogs through training, traveling, and competing. “We get inside each other’s heads and I’m really tight with them.” She also enjoys the camaraderie with agility enthusiasts. “I’ve met cardiac surgeons, artists, teachers—people from every walk of life. We all love the dogs and we love doing this thing.”

The challenges with this lifestyle? “Early mornings,” she says, “like, 4:00 a.m., still-dark mornings.” She spends a lot of time on the road, in fact, traveling to regional competitions almost every weekend.

It’s a labor of love for Kelly—packing up crates and food, and spending weekends in hotels. “There are many more competitions today than there were even 10 years ago,” Kelly points out. “People thinking of going into this,” she adds, “should be aware of the investment needed. Class fees, competition fees, equipment, hotels, meals.”

Kelly’s biggest goal is to have fun with her furry friends. She works hard to ensure they enjoy the sport, regardless of their outcomes in the ring. “They’re much more than competitive dogs to me. They’re family. And my first priority, above winning, is to do right by each of them.”



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ABOVE WINNING,
IS TO DO RIGHT
BY MY DOGS.”

