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KIMBERLY WEGEL '12:

Training Dogs— and Their Humans, Too

Kim Wegel '12 loves dogs so much she used to aspire to be one. As a child, she'd crawl around the house on all fours, barking and eating from bowls on the floor.

"I was dead set on literally transforming [into a dog]," she recalls.

Although that plan never materialized, Wegel achieved the next-best thing: establishing a career as a canine behavior consultant in her hometown of Roanoke, Virginia. In 2021, inspired by her experience training her two rescue dogs—Jemma, a "formerly feral" shepherd mix, and Linus, a Boxer with severe separation anxiety—she founded her company, Wags by Wegel, almost overnight.

After mastering her skills through an apprenticeship with a longtime dog trainer, she began directing the doggie day-care at a pet supply store, but it turned out that the owners' ethical philosophies did not align with her own.

So, she quit. On a Friday. By Monday, she'd built a website and her new business was born.

A few months later, Wegel met a certified dog trainer who became her partner in both work and life. The couple married in May 2022, and Kim and Bobbie Wegel now co-own Wags by Wegel and reside with Bobbie's three children from a prior relationship along with the newly arrived 8-month-old daughter they share. Jemma the dog rounds out the pack.

You studied German literature and art history. Did your education inform your work in any way?

I credit Haverford with opening up my brain to analyzing language and communication. Dogs don't communicate using words. They use body language. Humans can communicate with dogs using similar body signals, and that cross-species communication fascinates me. One of my professors in particular—John Muse, assistant professor of visual studies, who actually grew up in Roanoke and is now a dear friend—taught me to read differently, looking not only at words but at what an entire scene is conveying. That awareness of subtext informed my approach to dogs and how to help people communicate with them efficiently and effectively.

You're a "rewards-based canine behavior consultant." What does that mean?

We usually work with dogs who have histories of anxiety or aggression. Our training philosophy is LIMA, which stands for "least intrusive, minimally aversive." That means we first attempt to alter a dog's environment so that she maintains control of her physical body and space. Let's say my dog barks when other dogs go by. Can I cover the windows to stop that from happening? I've changed her environment without asking her to do anything different. If we can't solve a problem that way, then we prefer to address it using treats, toys, and praise. So, maybe every time a dog walks by, I teach my dog to go sit on a mat, and when she does, I reward her with treats or praise.

How do you feel about shock collars and other disciplinary tools?

I argue against the kind of punishments you'll find in the typical Cesar Millan *Dog Whisperer* playbook, like telling someone to [alpha] roll their dog—[forcibly roll him onto

his side and pin him there]—if he does something bad. Those methods come from outdated science based on poorly designed studies, for which the researcher has actually apologized.

Also, people's timing often sucks when they train animals. We use clicker training, making a click sound immediately when a dog performs a behavior and following with a treat so that she associates the behavior with the sound and reward. Even people who use clickers every day mistime their clicks, though. And the same mistiming will happen with pulling a prong collar or pressing the button on a remote e-collar, affecting what behavior a dog associates with the punishment. If we can't be confident in our timing when using positive reinforcement methods, we have no business using a shock collar as punishment. The fact that these tools remain on the market for pet owners to buy is really unfortunate.

What kind of certification does your job require?

Dog training is an entirely unregulated industry. Anybody can call themselves a trainer regardless of their education. But there are a handful of certifying bodies that are closely associated with reputable veterinary behavior organizations, and they require you to demonstrate—through an examination process—that you know what you're doing. I hold two dog behavioral consultant certifications, one through the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants and one through the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers. Maintaining these requires continuing education hours, so I participate regularly in conferences and webinars.

What kinds of dogs are the easiest to train?

More than training dogs, we train people—and the most successful

dogs live with dedicated people who put in the time to help their dogs succeed. We teach humans to respect their dogs, to meet them as individuals, and to appreciate that the dog in front of them is not a blank slate. Clients constantly say things like, "I want to be able to take him to daycare and to the farmers' market and to breweries." And we ask, "OK, but does your dog want to do that?"

I can teach a dog to do something, but I have to recognize whether the person on the other end of the leash is capable of continuing the work when I'm gone. It's a red flag when a client wants to sit back and watch us do the training. Expanding our remote training services with virtual sessions has helped adjust people's expectations because they have to do the work without us physically being there.

Your company is young. Any plans for the future of Wags by Wegel?

Long term, we hope to work more collaboratively with animal rescues and shelters. We've done some of that already, but we would like to provide more support so that people are not leaving with a dog they don't know how to handle because she just spent months in a stressful environment or has bounced from home to home and is struggling to get her wits about her. And if we work with new adopters on managing dogs who have behavioral issues, we can help keep those dogs from ultimately being returned to a shelter.

Can you teach an old dog new tricks?

Absolutely! The longer a dog has practiced a behavior, the longer it takes to modify that behavior. But any dog can learn new things.

*More information: wagsbywegel.com
—Karen Brooks*