

Pet sitter trades 'ruff' job for one she loves

By **MARDY FONES**

For *The Tennessean*

Julia Duke's life has gone to the dogs. And the cats and the birds.

The former marketing executive leaped off the corporate fast track after doing stints at HCA, the Nashville Healthcare Council, Gresham Smith Architects and the American Heart Association to create a pet-sitting business — The Privileged Pet — more than 10 years ago (www.theprivilegedpet.com).

"I finally discovered that it isn't about the money," said Duke, 50, who started out pet sitting part time.

"Then I had the boss from hell. I finally figured out that working for myself just made a lot more sense."

The zero overhead and the chance to create her own working life pushed Duke to build a full-time business by using her professional contacts as a route for securing clients. To enhance efficiency and limit non-billable time, she confines her pet sitting to an eight-mile radius of her Green Hills home.

"Essentially, to do this work, you have to have a good vehicle (she has a Rodeo), be really organized and committed, have the ability to get along with people and do what you say you're going to do," Duke said. Her working life is defined by the animals that are her first priority.

For some, she goes into their homes while their owners are away and attends to their needs, plus does all of plenty of TLC. Some dog clients spend the day with her, riding from house to house and waiting in her Rodeo.

"I have one dog that's been riding with me for five-and-a-half years. Sometimes I have as many as three dogs in the car with me during the day," Duke said.

"They just love to ride."

She loves animals but does have her limits. "I've been asked to walk someone's pot-bellied pig down West End and I won't do it. I tell people, 'I don't do swine and I don't do reptiles.'"

Duke charges \$15 an hour or \$125 for overnight care, and she's busy, very busy.

Even so, she said: "It's not about the money. I finally realized that."

She'd like to expand her business but has



GEORGE WALKER IV / STAFF

Julia Duke gets tangled up in her work as she takes Bella, left, Lucy and Kali for a walk in Centennial Park.

yet to find an employee who shares her passion and commitment.

"(Potential employees) are either old and afraid of the security systems in my clients' homes or they're young and want to bring their boyfriends along," she quipped.

To bridge the corporate benefits gap that

plagues many aspiring self-employed people, she purchased Blue Cross/Blue Shield coverage for \$30 a month through the Davidson County Farm Bureau.

"It's not about climbing the corporate ladder. There's so much more joy out there in things besides money," Duke said.

"I get love everywhere I go. Of course, it may be from a four-legged animal, but that makes more sense than standing outside of a conference room door praying and praying that things will go well before you go inside to do a job you love while you're working for people you can't stand." ■