

## Doggie rehab caters to canines in Marrero

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By Chris Bynum

*Staff writer*



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANDERSON

Dag's House is the first rehab center for dogs with disabilities. Created by Kim Dudek, founder of Belladonna, because of her own dog's (Dag) experiences after spinal surgery. Dag's House is a 1600-sq. foot facility with a hydrotherapy pool and acupuncturist.

Actress Stephanie Zimbalist was about to decline her invitation to come to New Orleans to participate in the upcoming Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival, all because her dachshund, Scampi, requires round-the-clock care. Then she heard about Dag's House, a housing and fitness facility for dogs with special needs.

Zimbalist inherited Scampi -- one of four dogs surrounding Zimbalist's mother on her bed when she died -- last year.

After disc surgery, Scampi became immobilized in her back legs, and she is also incontinent. Her needs could not be met at a regular boarding facility, so Zimbalist, her constant caretaker, was not going to leave her in California while she traveled here.

In some respects, Scampi is like the dog Dag used to be -- the reason Dag's House came to be.



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANDERSON

At Dag's House, doggies can undergo post-operative care that can get them back on all fours.

In October 2006, after Dagnabit, a 6-year-old pit bull terrier, had spinal surgery, the dog returned home to his owner 30 pounds lighter with reduced muscle mass and lack of control over his bodily functions. His back legs were not functional.

"Dag's spirit was broken," said Kim Dudek, a friend of the owner who helped out with post-surgery care and eventually assumed ownership of the lovable terrier.

A rehabilitation counselor prior to opening the Uptown Belladonna day spa in 1989, Dudek began to coordinate the efforts of a team of people -- a massage practitioner, a veterinarian-acupuncturist and a chiropractic and homeopathic veterinarian -- to put Dag back on all four feet.

"After two acupuncture treatments, Dag was able to stand up with help," said Dudek, who could see she was on the right track to return Dag to a more active lifestyle. And she could see that Dag was becoming her dog.

"It would have driven him nuts not to be able to get around," Dudek said. "I applied the principles of my trade to my dog."

Dog rehabilitation is relatively new in the New Orleans area, appearing in the past seven years with rehabilitation facilities operating at a couple of veterinary specialty clinics in the area.



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANDERSON

The facility sits on 2 ½ acres in Marrero, which Dudek bought after she and Graci attended the animal rehabilitation certification program at the University of Tennessee.

"Physical rehabilitation is not just for people anymore," says Robby Porter, a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner since 2001, who began his rehabilitation practice at Southeast Veterinary Specialists in Metairie and now operates Animal Rehabilitation Center in Mandeville. Porter's services read like a list of cutting-edge medical treatments: underwater treadmill, swimming, electrical muscle stimulation, pain control via

transcutaneous electro-nerve stimulation (TENS) and cold laser treatments, ultra-sound therapy, physio-ball therapy and prescribed therapeutic exercise.

"Rehabilitation has saved lives and improved the quality of lives of many animals," says Porter, who has seen the progress of animal rehabilitation in the short time it has been in existence.

"When a dog has surgery, rehabilitation is now part of the recovery, as it is for humans," Dudek says. "I'm not saying every dog can be rehabilitated, but there are options other than putting a dog down."

In the case of Dag's House, there are also alternative therapies such as chiropractic care and acupuncture overseen by veterinarian Dr. Karen Graci, who directs the New Orleans Canine Rehabilitation Group associated with Dag's House. A veterinarian referral is required for rehabilitation services. But the day-care facility is open to special needs pets.

On a recent February day, Dag reclined on a dog bed, his head cradled in the arms of Dudek as Dr. Graci performed acupuncture to his back legs. Dag was a bit fidgety because two of his canine playmates and fellow day-care clients -- a boxer named Nina and a retriever mix named Sally Jo -- waited in the next room in anticipation of daily romping. Nina experiences seizures, and Sally Jo had hip surgery. Neither medical issue lowers the doggie enthusiasm level, even with the soothing New Age music playing in the background.

Dag gets around in a dog wheelchair, his back legs resting in a sling between the wheels, his front legs taking him where he wants to go. Audubon Park was one of those places. It was there that Dudek was frequently stopped by other dog-owners with similar circumstances -- working people with pets that were dependent on them for round-the-clock care. Dudek decided there was a need for a canine facility for special needs pets.

"What do other people do who have dogs with issues like Dag's, especially if they are working eight hours a day?" says Dudek, who still carries the 60-pound Dag up and down the stairs at her house so he can stay by her side.



STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANDERSON

Kim Dudek, founder of Dag's House.

Zimbalist is one of those canine caretakers with a busy career. When she took the 6-year-old dachshund home after her mother's death, the two bonded.

"Scampi galloped into my life. At the time, I was doing back-to-back theater in California, but she traveled with me. We ran and played in different parks and different beaches," said Zimbalist, perhaps best remembered as Pierce Brosnan's co-star on the NBC series "Remington Steele."

But when Scampi had back surgery Zimbalist embarked on a recovery course that has included the gamut of traditional and alternative canine therapies from electrical stimulation and bio-energetic synchronization techniques to reiki -- a form of Japanese touch therapy-- and aromatherapy. Her devotion goes so far as sleeping on a futon on the floor so Scampi is not tempted to want to jump on the bed.

In California, Scampi has daily workouts on an underwater treadmill, and Zimbalist has learned manipulation exercises she can do to improve Scampi's mobility.

Because Dag's House provides rehabilitation, day care and boarding facilities for dogs following illness or surgery, Zimbalist is able to travel here with her dog and participate in the Tennessee Williams Festival as both an actress and a judge.

While there, Scampi will no doubt meet Dag, who has already become accustomed to the underwater treadmill where walking in water works the muscles in his back legs.

The facility sits on 2 ½ acres in Marrero, which Dudek bought after she and Graci attended the animal rehabilitation certification program at the University of Tennessee.

The facility's physical metamorphosis continues with the installation of an outdoor pool and agility courses. A personal trainer is already on staff for exercise programs tailored to the dog's individual conditioning needs.

"We also want to be an educational resource for dog owners seeking information for special-needs pets," Dudek says.

The single-story center, equipped with ramps, is combination home spa and rehab center -- gourmet dog cookies on the kitchen counter, pet portraits on the walls, luxury dog beds, aromatherapy in the air and such rehabilitation equipment as hoists and slings, Therabands, wheelchairs and physio balls. An endless swimming pool for water therapy is next on the list.

Dudek says she and other pet owners learned early to improvise before some of this canine equipment became available. But what seems to top the list is relaxation and doggie interaction where healing is a lot about happy interaction.

"Dag may never be Mr. Pitt Bull with a swagger," Dudek says. "He may always have a little drunken sailor walk. But he's partially walking now, and he has control of his bodily functions."

*Staff writer Chris Bynum can be reached at [cbynum@timespicayune.com](mailto:cbynum@timespicayune.com) or (504) 826-3458.*