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Dot-com for dogs

South Loop dogs have a new place to call home – online.

3



Pedals, not paddles

On the Chicago River, riding one of Gene Arbetter's hydro-bikes-for-hire is 'like taking a tricycle on the Interstate'

By BRETT McNEIL
Editor

John McPhee reads the river from a Grumman aluminum. Gene Arbetter, sitting about two and a half feet off the surface of the South Branch, uses a river bike. And, no, it's nothing like a paddleboat.

Instead, Arbetter, who discovered "hydro bikes" during a 1999 trip to Mexico, prefers to think of his catamaraned and propeller-driven bike-like contraptions as "just like an exercycle." And where it's impossible to gather any sort of speed in a paddleboat (those poky tubes floating around

SOUTH LOOP



Street, was all but ready for the gaggle of reporters and critics that would

South Loop canines join dot-com craze

Local couple's website chronicles a growing Dogopolis, gets neighborhood pet owners acquainted with each other

By LORIEN MENHENNETT
Editorial Intern

Like many South Loop residents, Lakota—according to her website—loves to bask in the sun and peruse the aisles of Animal House pet store. She despises aggressive dogs, trudging through dreary Chicago drizzle, and waiting in downtown traffic snarls. Unlike most South Loopers, Lakota has four legs, a coat of brown fur and a pointed, black snout that's usually dripping wet. Lakota is a dog. A Rhodesian Ridgeback, to be precise. But to her owners, canine-conscious local entrepreneurs Blythe and Jeffrey Veltman, Lakota is as much a member of the community as anyone.

"As you know, if your family has a dog, it's a family member too," Blythe said.

Thus, it seemed natural that the Veltmans' dual interests in dog ownership and Web design should come together in the creation of southloopdogs.com, Chicago's very own online, canine community. The Veltmans' Website, launched this spring, encourages both interaction and activism in a neighborhood where you're about as likely to see a person with a dog as without one.

Not only do the Veltmans consider Lakota a family member, she is also

something of a mammalian muse, having the inspired their project. It was while walking Lakota one day that the Veltmans discovered they knew some of their canine neighbors better than their human ones. Perhaps, the Veltmans reasoned, they could use the bond between pets and people to build a better sense of community.

"As we were walking our dog last year, we realized we knew the dogs' names, but not the people's names," Jeffrey said.

So last summer, the couple got "click happy" with a digital camera and snapped photos of more than 100 local canines. Then they got down to business—their business, as a matter of fact. The Veltmans run J.B. Interaction, a Web and CD-ROM design and development firm with clients as diverse as the University of Chicago and Zurich Insurance.

They were able to pull from their professional experience in launching southloopdogs.com, and they did so with the goal of helping local dogs and owners get to know each other. The site's photo gallery serves as a sort of pictorial directory, matching pets' and people's names and faces. Newcomers or dog-walkers who missed the Veltmans' sidewalk photo shoots can even submit pictures and biographies of their pets electronically.



Photo by Eric Fogleman

Lakota, the four-legged, furry member of Blythe and Jeffrey Veltman's family, inspired them to create an online canine community for the South Loop.

But unlike the Website's photographic stills, Chicago's canine community is by no means static. The Veltmans continually update it with current information.

The Website alerts dog owners to upcoming events, like the Chicago Dog Jog at Montrose Harbor in September. It also provides links to other dog-related

websites, like dogpark.com, where surfers can learn about the 507 dog parks in the U.S.; or campdogwood.com, which invites dog owners to register for a weekend of bonding with their canine while staying at a lakefront cabin.

The Veltmans also decided to take their Website a step further, from simply informing dog owners to calling them to action. It includes a rescue link complete with the names and pictures of homeless dogs in need of owners. (Dog lovers take heart: Madison, the site's latest orphan, recently found a home.)

And with all the recent hype about creating a local dog park, the Veltmans were not to be left out. They posted an electronic version of a local petition requesting the Chicago Park District to establish a nearby dog friendly area, and so far have more than 100 e-signatures. The site also announces the meetings for Dog P.A.C. (Park Action Co-op), the South Loop's newest dog park council, which the Veltmans helped found.

Pleased so far with the interest in their Website, Blythe holds future hopes of securing a corporate sponsor and expanding their "test site" beyond the confines of the South Loop, and into other dog-friendly areas.

"We have all this positive feedback," Blythe said. "We'd love to eventually do this for other neighborhoods."