

Puppy Love



Camilla Gray-Nelson at Dairydell Canine in Petaluma with her dog, Teba.
[Duncan Garrett Photography]

Dairydell Canine's Camilla Gray-Nelson teaches dogs and owners how to communicate.

By Michael Keel

Among the many ranches and farms that adorn the bald hills of Petaluma is a place called Dairydell Canine; it's what some might consider heaven on earth for dogs. Owner Camilla Gray-Nelson, otherwise known as the "Dog Talk Diva," is a professional dog trainer, born and raised on a dairy farm in Petaluma, who's been working with animals her whole life.

Gray-Nelson, who began training dogs in 1989, started as a dog breeder, exhibitor and competitor in AKC competitions. "Dairydell" was her breeding kennel name. Gray-

Nelson never planned on being a dog trainer. Rather, it was a hobby while she worked for the government and then in the wine industry. Gray-Nelson says, "I was planning a traditional career, but sometimes life takes us to some unexpected places." When she branched out from hobby to charging others for her services, she started with house-calls on the weekends. Gray-Nelson laughs, "Have truck, will train—you know?"



Dairydell Canine's boarding facilities (top) and main offices (bottom)

[Photos by Michael Keel]



In 2001, she remodeled her family's old milking barn to start her first board-and-train facility—and clients started coming. Back then, just four dogs per week kept her busy full-time, but her path was set. By 2007, she had hundreds of clients begging her to offer boarding and other services, and that's when she expanded and built the facility in what had formerly been a cow field on her Adobe Road property. Dairydell Canine now offers boarding, daycare, grooming and activities like nature walks, swimming and sheep herding in addition to its popular dog training services.

In 2007, just before the recession hit full bore, Gray-Nelson was faced with a decision: take out a loan to expand or back off and wait out the downturn. She chose to take the risk and, by 2009, revenues were up 30 percent. Today, they're up 300 percent and the company employs up to 10 people at a time, depending on the season. Asked why she chose to risk all for the young business, Gray-Nelson responds simply that, at the time, it seemed like the logical next step for growth and a way to fill a need for even more dogs—and the people who love them. "It was my way of giving back to my four-legged friends and mentors," she says.

Located on a 120-acre former dairy ranch, Dairydell's expanded facility now has an 11,000-square-foot boarding barn, a saltwater swimming pool (great for injured or recovering dogs), a 25,000-square-foot covered sports arena and a 20,000-square-foot outdoor training and exercise arena that also includes an agility course. The grounds have plenty of running room and everything is in its place—clean, organized, gated and safe for your precious family members. It's quite simply a resort for the four-legged kind.

Dairydell's main office looks like a remodeled Lake Tahoe cabin: Hardwood floors stretch across the room with high-peaked, barn-style wood ceilings, cozy rugs and an old-fashioned red fireplace in the corner. Gray-Nelson says, "I wanted it to be cozy for our little friends and humans. I want them to know this as their home when they stay, not a hospital or veterinarian's office with linoleum floors

and a scary smell."

The relaxed, homey atmosphere is a match for Gray-Nelson, who has an undergraduate science degree from Cal Poly and attended graduate school in public administration at Cal State Hayward. But most of the skills she's using these days are owed to the 4-H program. As a child, she says, it was her experience in the local 4-H club that taught her all the skills one really needs to succeed in business: record keeping, profit and loss statements, public speaking, responsibility, teamwork and leadership. Gray-Nelson says graduate school taught her theory, but 4-H molded her with hands-on experience, starting

when she was just 11 years old. "It's really outstanding how important it was for me when I look back on it," she says. Today, she serves on the board of the Sonoma County 4-H Foundation, which independently raises funds to support local 4-H clubs and offers educational scholarships to promising 4-H members, helping them go on to college and trade schools. Gray-Nelson says, "4-H grows leaders, and I want to be part of that legacy for our county."

Getting started

Gray-Nelson started training dogs more than 20 years ago, beginning with her own Dalmatian, Arson. Prior to that, she'd only trained cows and ponies. But during one of her first canine obedience classes, she remembers thinking, "This is easy; I get this!" On the way home, she told her husband, Kurt, a dog-lover extraordinaire who's an account manager for UPS, that she could see herself competing and really getting into the obedience work. Soon, she was entering dog obedience competitions, breed ring competitions, earning titles and championships.

In the early 1990s, she began selling the Dalmatian puppies she'd bred and started giving free obedience classes to new puppy owners. As word spread about how good she was, friends of friends started asking her to help them. That's when the bells really started chiming in her head to start a business. "And the rest, as they say, is history!" she says.

Gray-Nelson credits her innate dog training skills to growing up on a farm, where all of her free time was spent with animals. "I didn't have many two-legged friends until high school," she says. As a child, she learned hands-on how animals think and relate with human beings and with each other. Canines have many ways of communicating, she explains: through eye contact, posture and body language, and subtle-but-important verbal and physical cues.

Dogs are trying to communicate with their owners every day, and Gray-Nelson helps owners understand what their dogs are saying. She teaches them about eye contact, posture, tone of voice and even about the effect that emotions can have on communication. In short, she teaches people how dogs think and why they do what they do. "The secret to any relationship is communication," she says. "I don't care if it's animals or people, it's all about learning how to communicate."

Dairydell Canine has many training programs, including seven-

week-long group classes. The classes have a six-dog limit to keep stress levels low and attention focused (unlike most programs with 10 or more dogs in a room). It also offers a personal trainer option. “Our specialty is our live-in school, where we professionally train the dog during the week and their owners on the weekend. That’s the secret: You have to train the owner, too!” Dairydell’s live-in “finishing school” is just one of its training services, but it’s the company’s gold standard. It’s an immersion program that allows for faster learning. The dogs are trained by professionals, so communication is clear and responses are molded correctly.

Most important, dog owners are professionally trained in how to follow through before they take their “new” dog home. This is the most important element of the training program: how they “transfer power” from the trainer to the owners. Gray-Nelson says, “I’m proud to say that Dairydell has the most extensive owner-training component in the industry, including ongoing training support for the life of the dog. It’s really what sets us apart.”

The most obvious transformation in the way a dog acts is in the first week of training, says Gray-Nelson. In most cases, the dog exhibits signs that indicate, “Finally! Someone to lead me—finally my owner *understands me!*”

Ladies first

Many dog trainers specialize within their work to focus on a particular training aspect or technique. Gray-Nelson’s focus is helping women dog owners or women who have dogs in their family. She may well be the first to cover this in a training program, but statistics show that three out of four dog-owning homes leave all dog management responsibilities to a woman (usually the household matriarch).

Unfortunately, women start at a natural disadvantage because dogs inherently respect size and strength—and women generally have neither. Prior to domestication, classic dog packs were always headed by an alpha male, and still today, dogs instinctively defer to superior physical strength. A woman cannot as easily draw on the natural leadership of size and strength that a male would; instead, they have to develop the other, more important, elements of leadership that go beyond the physical. “By and large, I find a lot of women don’t know how to do that, which leads to consistent mistakes,” says Gray-Nelson.

“Number one, they get angry and raise their voice. Number two, they accommodate and ‘baby’ the dog too much.” Both of these behaviors, from a dog’s perspective, are signs of subordination or weakness. This is because the top animal in a herd or a pack isn’t the noisy one, it’s the quiet one who focuses, follows through and never gets moved off an emotional center. “When you show your frustration, dogs won’t follow or listen,” says Gray-Nelson.

Women tend to accommodate everything a dog wants by showing too much affection, letting them lie wherever they want, giving too many treats or even feeling sorry for their dog. When these behaviors go unchecked, the dog is actually, in a sense, training its owner to accommodate his or her needs. Dogs read such actions from their own societal perspective: A dog that accommodates another dog is, in fact, seen as subordinate, “Of course, we should



Dairydell Canine has plenty of room to run (above) and swim (left), with some left over for Camilla’s other passion: horses. (Photos by Michael Keel)

always show love and affection for our dog, but when we constantly accommodate everything it wants, the dog can read it as weakness and stop taking us seriously.” Gray-Nelson teaches people how to achieve leadership without ever losing the

smile on their face or the calmness in their voice.

Dairydell’s clients are extremely happy with the results they’re seeing with their dogs. In a recent testimonial sent to Gray-Nelson, client Nadia M. wrote, “As you know, Dairydell and you were a last resort for us. Max was so challenging to walk and to even be around that we thought we’d have to find another family for him. Now he’s one of the most well behaved dogs I’ve ever seen and such a joy to be with.

“I feel like a great weight has been lifted off my shoulders and he and I have fallen in love with each other all over again! But if that’s not enough, the strength and discipline you gave me is extraordinary! I feel so much more in control of things. The training techniques you taught me have manifested themselves in so many ways. I have a newfound confidence and it’s due, in large part, to the things you taught me. You are simply the very best and I’m so glad to have met you. Thanks to you, we have *The Ultimate Dog!* As I said, there are no words to express my gratitude. My entire family is in awe of you, your staff and facility!”

“My clients are my business cards,” says Gray-Nelson. “I want them to be thankful after their experience. I want the dog and the owner to be equally happy.”

A diva is born

Gray-Nelson didn’t plan on becoming the “Dog Talk Diva,” the first dog trainer in the country to specialize in helping women control and train their dogs, but life takes you in interesting directions sometimes. Since her career began, the vast majority of her 10,000+ clients have been women. They’re also the ones in charge of the family dogs and the ones who’ve struggled the most with getting their dogs to listen and obey. Gray-Nelson says, “Without realizing it, my ‘natural’ training methods turned out to be exactly what women needed, since my training doesn’t rely on strength or size. I’m a little gal!”

She makes the most of the leadership skills that women can be good at: patience, persistence and follow-through. Gray-Nelson

explains, “Most people don’t realize that the leaders in the animal world are quiet and focused. I teach women to be that!”

Gray-Nelson came up with the name, Dog Talk Diva, because all “divas” like things their way, just like dog trainers. The only difference is that Gray-Nelson does it all in “dog talk”—the non-verbal language of dogs that uses posture, eye contact, boundaries and follow-through. Gray-Nelson says, “Voila! Dog Talk Diva! My blog (www.dogtalkdiva.com) features posts on all sorts of dog-related topics and is especially geared toward women, though lots of men are reading it, too.” Her message of quiet, natural power that she learned from the animals on her farm growing up is the theme in every article, from housetraining to balancing the stresses of kids, a job, the household and the dog.

What the future holds

Gray-Nelson also has plans for a new line of dog training products for women that will speak to women’s interests, needs and relate the training of their dogs to similarities in raising their kids. “I’m having fun with it, still working on it,” she says. Her

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most exciting achievement so far is the completion of her first book: *Lipstick and the Leash: A Woman’s Guide to Getting What You Want From Your Dog and Your Life*. When it’s released in March 2012 (available through www.lipstickandtheleash.com or www.doubledovepress.com), it will carry her message of quiet power to women everywhere, explaining that these secrets of calm, natural control are not just for dogs.

“My hope is that the book will empower women everywhere in all aspects of life,” she says. She’s very excited for her future and says she’s always searching for new information to better her training abilities. “It’s very

important to always be learning, because if you don’t, you just stagnate. I’m into learning from others and molding things together.

“I love helping people, and I absolutely love helping dogs,” she says. “If there’s any secret to my business success, it’s that I’m focused on that and not on making money. It’s always been about making those relationships work.”

An interesting thing happens when you have that focus. The money and success find you. ■



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