



Dog groomers Rani Merz, left, and Melanie Denton suds up Jack, who got skunked.

Dog-Detailing Business

Furry friends get a royal salon treatment

By Jeanie Senior

With blow dryers roaring and dogs barking, it can get pretty noisy at Groomingdales Pet Salon. But things do calm down. On a recent midday, even with owner Rani Merz and two other groomers at work, the place is quiet.

Rani is at the scissoring stage, putting the final touches on Nelson, a handsome gray standard poodle/golden retriever mix. He is getting the full treatment: nails trimmed, ears cleaned, bathed, dried and clipped. Nelson stands quietly as Rani trims his tail and eyebrows and carefully cuts the fringe at the edge of his ears.

“What we should be called is dog detailers,” Rani jokes.

She stops to help Melanie Denton cajole a young golden retriever, dried and brushed, into his crate. She consults with

groomer Heidi Fisher about the clip she is doing on a happy little Havanese.

Initially, Groomingdales belonged to Rani’s daughter Alexa. It is in a space remodeled from the cold storage room of the old Dickey Farms fruit stand on SR 14, just west of Bingen. When Dickeys built a new store across the highway, Alexa and her boyfriend and Rani’s husband, Bob, worked for months to transform the space.

Groomingdales opened in January 2005.

“It kind of just exploded, so then she needed my help,” Rani says. “Dealing with fleas and ticks and allergies—all of those things that come along—she had to teach me.”

Posters around the shop illustrate clips for different breeds, although Rani says owners often specify their preference.

“Your eyesight really matters,” she says. “You have to develop an eye for seeing whether the face is right, just getting the scissoring down.”

“There are just varying amounts of talent. My daughter, from the very beginning, her instructor kept saying, wow, she could be grooming for the highest of high show dogs. She’s just a natural at scissors. I was not. Through practice, I have learned.”

In 2008, mother and daughter closed the shop for six months and hiked the Pacific Crest Trail. At the end of the hike, Alexa decided to travel abroad, so Rani took over the business.

“I basically got thrown in at the deep end, but I had been her assistant for several years,” Rani says. “It was a crash course, but I had been doing most of it and, of course, I watched her.”

It is hard to rush grooming, so it is important that dogs be ready for their final trims on a staggered basis.

“We do great together,” she says of Heidi, who has worked at Groomingdales since the first of the year. “I do prep—cleaning ears, doing nails, figuring out if they have skin problems, what shampoo to use, try extra conditioner—that sort of thing. I check them in, check them out. She does finishing while I’m working on the others. As soon as I know she’s nearly done, I tee up another one. We’ve got to be pretty efficient.”

Prices vary according to the dog’s size, coat and the amount of work grooming requires. Bath, nails and ears for a small Chihuahua might cost \$24 to \$27, a German shepherd \$45 to \$60, depending on their coat and the time of the year. Grooming takes longer in the fall and spring. Fancy clips take longer and cost more.

Besides fleas, ticks, allergies and skunks—Rani uses a mix of Dawn dishwashing soap, Tecnu anti-poison oak soap and hydrogen peroxide, but says there is no magic bullet for skunks—she calls cheat grass seeds the worst plague for area dogs.

A number of years back, a vet sent over a client with their samoyed, with orders to strip off its thick white coat.

“That poor dog had gotten into cheat grass, which had worked its way down through the coat into its body,” Rani recalls.



Nelson, a gray standard poodle/golden retriever mix, waits patiently as Rani carefully edges his ears.

Among the numerous cheat grass seeds that had screwed themselves into the dog’s flesh was one that was about to embed itself into the dog’s liver. After Groomingdales shaved the dog, the vet had to search out all of the cheat grass.

“When she came back to be reshaved, I bet she had 100 stitches,” Rani says.

Rani advises owners to keep an eye on their dog’s feet, especially breeds with hairy feet, such as samoyeds, spitzes, akitas and golden retrievers.

Groomingdales has a lot of repeat customers, including at least one dog who, after years of regular visits, trots in and puts himself into one at the kennels at the back of the shop, where he stays until he is called. When it is his turn, he hops onto the grooming table. When the grooming is done, he starts toward the spot where dog collars are kept.

As for dogs that bite, “We try to figure out what the triggers are and then jolly them past it,” Rani says, whether it is the head, tail, ears or feet. Sometimes two people work together with a difficult dog, one as a spotter.

After nine years in the business, some of Rani’s regulars have died. Given her obvious affection for her clients, those are hard times.

“I’ll stand there and cry with those poor people who have lost their dog,” she says. ■