

This raw deal a good one

Couple leaves the rat race to make raw food for pet owners

BY ANDREW A. DUFFY, TIMESCOLONIST.COM DECEMBER 10, 2011



Neal and Jo-Anne Cropper with bulldog Maggie with their raw food for pets.

Photograph by: Lyle Stafford, timescolonist.com

The plan was to do it for the health of their dogs, but Neal and Jo-Anne Cropper have found opening a pet food store that specializes in raw, real food for dogs and cats has had a big impact on their own health.

No commute, no cellphone, no work stress, no boss.

"It's been fantastic. It's all about quality of life," said Neal, who gave up his position as CEO of software firm Comtech Systems to join his wife, who left a bookkeeping job, to open Growlies For Pets in Langford. "Now my day is talking about dogs and cats. Quality-of-life-wise, it's been tremendous."

Added Jo-Anne: "I was coming into town from Metchosin every day. The stress from work was getting to me, and this has been a great change. Being your own boss has made a big difference."

For Neal, one of the biggest transitions was dumping the cellphone.

"That was the big one, getting rid of the phone and not being tied to it 24 hours a day," he said,

adding there was also a change in direction at the software firm that no longer lined up with his own goals. "Ultimately, you have to believe in what you're doing, and as a pet lover this is an easy one."

The idea came to the Croppers in 2007 in the aftermath of the largest ever pet food recall in North America. The recall involved more than 100 brands of dog and cat food that had been found to contain contaminated wheat gluten from China. "Trusted names in pet food were coming off the shelves and we didn't know what to feed our dogs," said Neal.

Jo-Anne started looking into raw food for their pets as an alternative.

Driving by an empty store front on Happy Valley Road every day on the way to work the couple saw an opportunity to bring raw healthy pet food to the West Shore.

"It's simple. It just made sense to us. If processed food is bad for us. If we're not supposed to live off processed-food diets, it shouldn't be good for our pets," said Neal. "Often, the advice for pets was processed is better, but that didn't make sense to me."

So with a few left-over freezers from what had been an ice cream store, the couple opened Growlies four years ago, selling frozen raw food designed specifically for cats and dogs.

"Demand has been growing steadily, but it was a slow take-up," said Jo-Anne.

The couple, who have since upgraded their freezers and installed glass-front standing freezers for ease of shopping, boast 1,200 members of their loyalty program and have a next-day delivery service that has found an audience all over the region.

The popularity of it seems to have grown, mirroring the movement to slow food and the 100-mile diet for humans. "That's become really important. We get a lot of people asking where the food comes from," said Jo-Anne.

The answer is as local as possible. Growlies is supplied by three Island producers, one on the mainland and another in Alberta. There are a few products imported from Australia and New Zealand.

"If we can, we bring in only Canadian brands, and it's all human quality food," said Neal, though he quickly added few humans would actually eat it given there is no spicing. It often contains some organ meat that humans tend to stay away from and the odd bit of bone. "But we try to offer the variety that would be required in a real-food diet."

The store's offerings include stuffed (with sweet potato) Cornish hen, whole tripe, whole herring, elk bones, lamb necks and pretty much any kind of protein you can imagine. It's also available online (www.growlies.ca) and can be delivered for a charge of \$5.

"It's real food, it's live food, it has enzymes and nutrients that haven't been cooked away as kibble," said Jo-Anne.

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