



Pet-Sitter Success Stories:

Dr. Lisa MacElderry, owner of Cozy Cats at Home, LLC *Veterinarian enriches cats' and humans' lives*

By Meghann Evans, PSI Marketing & Communications Coordinator

If you got a peek at one of Dr. Lisa MacElderry's cat-sitting visits, you might see her dashing through the house with a cat wand or feathers—cat hot in pursuit. Or perhaps you would see her giving a cat a new food puzzle.

For Lisa, enrichment is a vital part of every cat visit, and something she is well-equipped to provide, given her lifelong love of cats, fascination with cat behavior, and decades of experience as a veterinarian.

After retiring from her long-time career as a veterinary medical officer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Care division, inspecting animal facilities, Lisa opened her cat-sitting business, Cozy Cats at Home, LLC in Elgin, South Carolina, in 2019.

Lisa chuckles when calculating her expenses and drive time and says, "I am definitely not in this for the money."

She has about a dozen clients right now and is content to grow slowly, explaining, "My whole goal is just to improve cat's lives and cat owners' lives."

From turning on soft harp music at visits to explaining litter box best practices to cat parents, Lisa takes pride in improving clients' lives—both the human and four-pawed variety. And the dedication is paying off.

One of her cat clients recently left a review saying: "When we come home, the cats seem to mope for a couple of days because they're missing Lisa."

Unexpected paths

When Lisa graduated from Auburn University with her veterinary degree in 1985, her plan was to go into private practice, and she did work in private practices for four years.

“I already had a passion for cats to start with, having had cats ever since I was a child,” Lisa notes.

At one private practice she had her own cat clientele, with cat owners who would specifically ask for her. She had an interest in cat behavior even back then, which has only grown stronger in the past decade.

But the veterinary world is tough on young graduates, and Lisa needed job security. Someone mentioned federal government jobs and working in food processing plants, but Lisa laughed. In career days at veterinary school, that was a job she had said she would never do.

“Never say never,” Lisa says. “You never know what’s going to happen in your life.”

So, she looked into the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service and ended up working as a veterinary medical officer in a chicken plant for four years, supervising food inspectors.

After that, she continued working for the federal government for another 26 years in the USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). In the agency’s Animal Care division, she worked as an inspector to enforce the Animal Welfare Act. She inspected animal facilities that housed everything from tigers to primates—magician operations, petting zoos, municipal zoos, research facilities, transport operations (i.e., airlines, ground transporters), you name it.

Lisa became a specialist in environmental enrichment for primates, and that interest in environmental enrichment is something she carried over to the cat world.

As Lisa was eyeing her 30-year retirement from the federal government, she considered opening a cat-boarding facility on her property. After driving up to 26,000 miles a year in her inspector job and being in a car wreck on the highway, Lisa thought, “I don’t want to have to get in the car ever again.”

But her husband asked, “What do cats really want?” And she thought, *They want to stay in their own home and have someone take care of them.*

A new passion

Back in 2003 when Lisa’s family moved to South Carolina, she had checked ahead and found a pet sitter there. One day she told the husband-and-wife team, “I might like to

do something like this one day when I retire. ... What does it take? How early in the morning do you have to get up?” They said they left the house by 5 a.m. each day, but, Lisa noted that they were servicing dogs as well. Lisa, who is not a morning person, decided to go a different route—one that fit her desires and passion.

“I love dogs, but I have a passion for cats, and I have a passion for cat behavior,” Lisa explains.

So in 2019, she started setting up her cat-sitting business. She went to the Small Business Administration, she filed and got her LLC, she launched her website, and she got a logo. When she retired from her government job in July of 2019, she opened Cozy Cats at Home. She also joined PSI and earned PSI’s CPPS—Certified Professional Pet Sitter® designation.

For marketing, Lisa set up Google My Business and said her PSI listing has been great. She also has had an ad in a local magazine and the town newspaper, and she took her business cards to local veterinarians and groomers. She has offered a free visit to any client who refers an established booking and has benefited from word-of-mouth advertising.

But one of her other strategies? “I just talk to people,” Lisa says. She’ll ask total strangers if they have cats.

Lisa makes sure to tell her clients that she is not their veterinarian—she *is* a veterinarian but is licensed in North Carolina. But she can draw on her veterinary experience as she observes their cats and takes care of them at visits.

Thorough visits

TIPS FOR SUCCESS: Lisa provides a variety of cat-care tips below that pet sitters can keep in mind.

When Lisa arrives for visits, she cleans the litter boxes and checks again before she leaves. Lisa tells people they can simplify things by keeping a tub next to the litter box with trash bags in it so it is easy to scoop. She says Sustainably Yours is an incredibly clumping litter that absorbs smell.

In addition to cleaning litter boxes on visits, Lisa will freshen water, give food, and focus on enriching activities. She also leaves a daily checklist after visits and texts photos and videos to clients.

Lisa learned about a harpist, Susan Raimond, who makes harp music for animals, so she bought her CDs and a portable CD player to set up to play low background music for cats.

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Lisa is also a massive proponent of puzzle feeders. She discusses this with pet owners during meet and greets, and if they give the okay, will bring some to try with their cats. She has several different types, but one simple version sitters can make is a treat jar with holes punched in it where cats can roll the food around.

She has one client whose cats each have their own room for feeding, with one cat who is a food hog. So Lisa decided to bring a feeder jar, and the cat was enamored with it. He will spend two hours rolling it around to get a bit of extra food, where he used to check the other cats' bowls to try to finish their food.

"Cats really do like to work for their food," Lisa says—adding, "most cats." With older cats it's hard, she says, so it depends on the cat and what their food motivation is.



Time to play

Play is a crucial element of Lisa's services, and she has a variety of activities to choose from. She brings cardboard boxes and packing paper, as well as feathers and toys like Jackson Galaxy's expandable wands with feathers on the end.

For younger cats, Lisa will pull feathers or wands through the house and run around in circles with the cats chasing her until

they're breathless. She also has a racetrack with a ball in it that some cats like. Lisa tries to brush cats if they want to be brushed and will pet them if they want to be petted, but most cats don't want to be picked up.

She loves to send clients photos and videos of her interacting with their cats, saying, "While on vacation, people like seeing their cats having fun."

Before leaving, she makes sure to put up toys to prevent safety hazards.

Most pet sitters have had the experience of the cat that didn't want to engage or come out of hiding. Lisa advises not going straight for the cat but to walk around speaking softly, perhaps dragging something behind you or near the cat, trying to entice them.

Feathers are great, Lisa says, and you can try to entice a shy cat with a feather or toy on a string nearby where they could reach out and paw at it. Also, find out from the owner if there is a special treat the cat likes.

"Keep a light tone in everything. ... Cats pick up on emotion and tone so much in your voice," Lisa says.

Lisa has also tried the slow blink technique, where you look at cats and do a very slow eye blink, which is a sign of relaxation.

"Take your time with them," Lisa says of cats. "If they want to hide, let them hide. Do find them."

Leaving a shy cat alone and playing with another cat in view of them can also help them relax, she notes.

And for meet and greets, Lisa brings peacock feathers along to make friends with cats.

Enrichment for all

When asked why she loves cats, Lisa says, "I just love their personalities. ... Maybe I love them too because they are so misunderstood."

While some people underestimate cats, that's not Lisa. She has had two cats that she taught to sit on command and give paw, and every cat she's ever had would come when called. Her current cat will play chase and hide and seek and shake hands.

Lisa recommends pet sitters pursue continuing education on cat behavior. Some of the resources she recommends include Mieshelle Nagelschneider's book "The Cat Whisperer"; Jackson Galaxy's articles and e-newsletter; the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants; and CattleDog Publishing's "Behavior Bytes" low stress handling e-newsletter.

She also believes in being a resource for clients and recommends leaving a recommendations list for them (e.g., a list of helpful changes that could be made, reminders about things you have discussed with them).

Lisa says of pet parents, "I find if you just make gentle suggestions or show their cat using something, then people will give it a try."

When she enriches cats' lives, she knows that it enriches the lives of their owners, too.

"Don't be shy about making suggestions for improving clients' and their cats' lives," she recommends.

Lisa wants to stay a solo sitter, and she is enjoying the experience.

"I'm meeting some wonderful people and wonderful cats," she says. ■

Photos courtesy of Derek McFarland