

The Animal Companion

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Morris County group champions dog parks

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A group of Morris County residents have formed a non-profit organization that helped create the Lewis Morris Dog Park in Morristown and continues to work for more and better dog parks all over the nation.

Morris Area Responsible Dog Owners Group, or MARDog, was created in 2002 by a group of dog lovers that befriended each other while walking their dogs at a baseball field. When neighbors complained, they were kicked out, and decided to try to get a dog park in Morristown.

"We had to do a grassroots effort because the mayor of Morristown was not a real animal lover," said MARDog president and founder Allison Deeb. "We got resolutions passed in Morristown, Morris Township, and Madison encouraging the park commission to provide a facility for the local community.

"Once those resolutions were passed, we had more clout when we went to the park commission. We also had to show that we as a group of dog owners were serious, and that's why we formed MARDog."

MARDog's founders and advisory board, made up of "veterinarians, groomers, trainers, professional fundraisers, and just good dog people," said Deeb, worked for a year and a half to convince the Morris County Park Commission, educate themselves and the commission about dog parks, and raise funds.

In the fall of 2003, a trial dog park was created at Lewis Morris Park in Morris Township. Then, in October of 2004, it was made permanent. "That was a big celebration for us," Deeb said.

Also called an off-leash area, the dog park covers two acres and is enclosed by a fence to allow dogs to exercise and socialize without the encumbrance of a leash.

"For the dog, there are socialization benefits, and, obviously, physical exercise," Deeb said.

But dog parks are for people, too. "It's an outdoor, public meeting place for people with their dogs. We like to say it's a park for people, and their dogs," Deeb explained.

Only about a year and a half since the experiment began, the off-leash area at Lewis Morris Park is the most widely used part of the park, according to Deeb. "At any time, it's where there's the most people. They love it. It brings people together, as well as their dogs. People have met friends and future spouses there."

Deeb calls dog parks in general a wonder-

ful community asset, because they provide many other, far-reaching benefits, some of which MARDog is still learning about.

Benefits such as pet-friendly businesses, which often crop up nearby. They also provide a place for these businesses, animal shelters, and non-profit animal welfare groups to advertise and do community outreach. Deeb speculates that, as a result, dog parks help reduce homeless animal populations, and is conducting research to confirm this.

They may even help property values. "It's definitely a draw. I see realtors all the time showing people the dog park," said Deeb.

After Deeb and her friends from the baseball field got their dog park, they decided their work was just beginning. The group currently is working to establish two more Morris County dog parks, and once Morris County is "saturated," said Deeb, they will continue their work elsewhere, a veritable Johnny Appleseed of dog parks.

"Now that we have a park in Morris Township, our group is working with towns that need our guidance, to help them and educate them and apply our expertise to build dog parks, as well as to support the public dog park in Morris Township," she said.

Motivated by what they found to be a lack of resources for towns and pet lovers who wish to establish dog parks, MARDog is working to become a complete source of information and support. Deeb said, "It's silly for towns to reinvent the wheel all the time. And it's silly for town officials who are not trained in animal welfare to build dog parks. You really need professionals behind it."

MARDog has created proprietary databases of information about fencing (chain-link anchored in concrete is the most expensive) and surfaces (grass is easy on the joints, but it can get muddy).

At local animal welfare events, they place booths that provide information on topics such as starting a dog park and dog park etiquette (be sure your dog gets along with other dogs, for example).

Recently, the group sponsored a free workshop where a trainer spoke about dog behaviors and what they mean, in hopes of helping people feel more comfortable in crowded dog parks.

"There isn't a group out there that's keeping the dog parks alive and well and healthy and safe. And there needs to be. My vision is to be a state of the art dog park organization," said Deeb. "And education and knowledge at our fingertips.

"Other people just like to go to the park

and enjoy the benefits, but I like to analyze it and see how we can help other towns get more of them created and established. While parks have been around for years, the benefits are so new. It's wonderfully exciting."

Dog lovers from around the nation have found MARDog via their website (www.mardog.org), and asked for its help. Deeb's presence has been requested in other New Jersey areas such as Jersey City and not-so-near North Carolina, but she has a full-time job and lacks the time and money it would take to travel the country working on dog parks.

MARDog is all volunteer work, she said. "It's a labor of love. I work as a pastry chef. I'm just doing it for the love of it, because I love my dog and all dogs," she said, adding that it would be wonderful to be a full-time dog park consultant.

The group claims 1,500 members who signed on to support the Morris Township dog park, but so far it has no source of revenue.

But Deeb is confident MARDog will prevail, and continue to do invaluable work. She said, "In some parts of Essex County, you can't even bring your dog to a park. New Jersey, as it gets to be more and more densely populated, will see a real need for these parks, because there is going to be no place where people can go."

And when that happens, some communities will face some very difficult obstacles. "Unfortunately, there are some towns, like Jersey City and Newark – not that I'm picking on anybody – where all you see in the shelters is Pit Bulls. And they're from fighting lines. Those types of dogs might not do well at a park, so if you're in an area that has a lot, that's where you need a concerned group like the group that we want to be.

"Just because a dog is aggressive doesn't mean he doesn't need a chance to run." Fortunately, if Deeb and her friends have anything to say about it, MARDog will be there.

Already MARDog is leaving puppyhood behind, as it works with volunteers from two Morris County townships where dog parks are being established. In Roxbury Township, a site for a new dog park has already been chosen, and Deputy Mayor Martin Schmidt is lending his support to the creation of the first MARDog chapter.

The Township of Parsippany is also working to create a dog park, and MARDog and the Parsippany Animal Supporters Society (PASS, 973-402-PETS) are working together to help provide an education and volunteer program. To learn more about the organization, visit www.MARDog.org.