

ROOM TO ZOOM:

Lee Fischer's pet-oriented franchise is so novel, some zoning officials are stumped

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Zoom Room: This growing franchise has really gone to the dogs

BY SUSAN R. MILLER

Chester, a high-energy Jack Russell mix, now has a place to blow off some steam without his owner having to take him to dog parks in the brutal South Florida sun.

His owner, Roberta Morris, recently stumbled upon Zoom Room in Coconut Creek, the first Florida-based franchisee of the Los Angeles-based upstart company of the same name.

"I just signed up for the six-week agility class," said Morris, who stopped taking Chester to dog parks because they were "hot and dirty."

L.A. native Jamie Van Wye and husband Mark, a Miami Beach native and the company's COO, founded Zoom Room in 2007.

Jamie Van Wye, a dog trainer and kennel consultant, was looking for a business that involved animals, but did not come with the high price tag and liabilities associated with running a kennel.

"Owners are with their dogs at all times," Mark Van Wye said. "We aren't training the dogs; we are training the people who love them."

In addition to training, Zoom Room offers owners the opportunity to take their dogs through the agility course for exercise, as well as to socialize. It offers doggie birthday parties and space for charity events.

A typical Zoom Room is 2,400 to 3,200 square feet. The total cost to own the business ranges from \$100,000 to \$170,000, including the \$35,000 franchise fee. The company provides training.

While there are no signed deals, Mark Van Wye said he has had inquiries about opening



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Lee Fischer and his daughter Jessica Fischer own the Zoom Room franchise in Coconut Creek.

franchises in Miami, Tampa, Jacksonville, Orlando, Miami Beach and Coral Gables.

MORE THAN ONE-FIFTH OF PETS ARE DOGS

According to the American Pet Products Association, Americans own about 377.4 million pets. About 78.2 million – more than one-fifth – are dogs. Last year, Americans spent \$48.3 billion on their animals. This year, that

figure is expected to hit \$50.8 billion.

That's one of the reasons Lee Fischer opened Florida's first Zoom Room franchise with his daughter Jessica Fischer, a college graduate with a hospitality degree.

The Parkland resident had been in the custom closet business for 20 years, but when things slowed during the housing downturn, he sought new opportunities.

"One of the things that attracted me is that, while people may be cutting back on going out to eat or on buying jewelry, they are spending money on their pets – and that's what this is all about," said Fischer, who still has his closet business.

Zoom Room, which has been franchising for less than two years, has seven corporate and franchise locations, with four more set to open in Charlotte, N.C.; Claremont, Calif.; Atlanta and Houston.

Fischer plans to open two or three Zoom Rooms in South Florida in the next two years.

But, not everything has come easy. Zoning problems kept Fischer from finding space in Palm Beach County, where he initially wanted to open.

Because the concept is new – his is the fifth franchise – there was no category for it. The county considered it a kennel, which is only allowed in industrial areas.

"I spent about six weeks battling them and lost," he said.

The city of Boca Raton would have allowed it, but the prices were too steep.

Fischer found 2,400 square feet in a Publix-anchored a retail center on State Road 441 in Coconut Creek, just south of the Broward/Palm Beach county line.

"The property owners and landlords were very cooperative," he said. "They wanted this business, and we ended up getting a pretty good deal."

It has generated a lot of walk-in traffic, with people signing up for classes or buying some of the products.