



This French Bulldog looks right at home in the French Quarter during one of the facility's Mardi Gras parties.

At Ease in the Big Easy

MaryMac's Doggie Retreat caters to anxious dogs in New Orleans.

By Jen Reeder

The first time a German Shepherd Dog named Titan arrived at MaryMac's Doggie Retreat in New Orleans, he didn't want to get out of the car. After his owner and the team coaxed him out, he refused to go inside the day care, boarding, and grooming facility.

So for several weeks, Courtney D. McWilliams, MaryMac's founder and owner, met Titan outside and sat with him on the porch. After a few weeks, he started spending about an hour with her inside the lobby. Eventually he made it into the play area and stayed for an hour or two.

Her patience paid off.

"Now Titan walks into the play area and acts like he owns the place," McWilliams, 35, says with a laugh. "He's like, 'What's up? Hey! How you doing?' We had to ease him into it, but now he's ready to board."

Titan is one of hundreds of dogs



Courtney D. McWilliams started her day care with a difference to help dogs overcome a common problem—fear of being away from their owners.

with separation anxiety helped by MaryMac's. In fact, McWilliams—who named her business after her late mother Marilyn McWilliams, whose nickname was “MaryMac”—designed her boutique retreat to comfort anxious dogs because her Shih Tzu, Gabbana, suffered from separation anxiety.

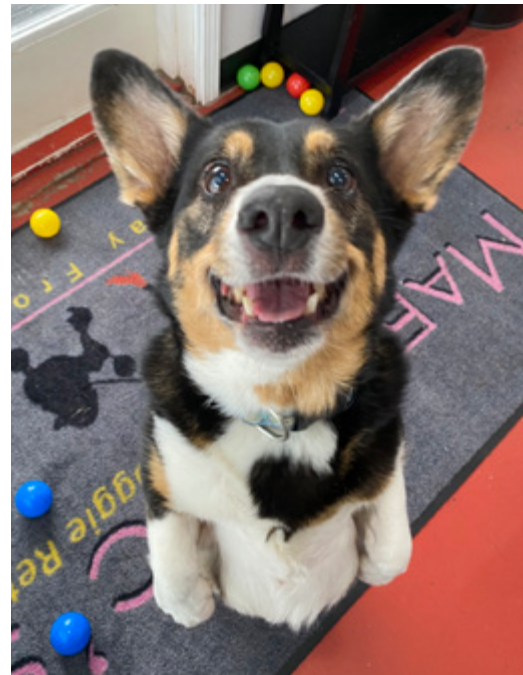
When her brother watched Gabbana while McWilliams was out of town in 2018, the little dog grew so upset that he broke the bars of his crate.

“They sent me a picture of the bars, and I said, ‘Where’s his teeth?’” she recalls. “That was my first concern.”

McWilliams began learning about separation anxiety and realizing Gabbana wasn't being mean and vindictive when

he urinated in her home when she was away. After small group play, CBD treats, and enrichment activities helped his behavior issues, she decided to expand her home petsitting business into a brick-and-mortar establishment in October 2019—not long before the COVID-19 pandemic caused first responders to need doggie day care more than ever.

As a former social worker with two master's degrees and experience with children, seniors, adults with disabilities, and people with addiction issues, McWilliams customizes care for each individual client and draws on her reserves of patience and compassion to reduce anxiety when dogs are away from home—and to help clients relax as well.



Enrichment activities, including tricks training, help take the edge off of a client's anxiety.

“I also find myself practicing social work in the lobby because a lot of times, the owners will have more anxiety regarding leaving their dogs than the dogs do themselves,” she says.

MaryMac's has a ratio of one employee for every five dogs—with a maximum of 20 dogs per day. Dogs who don't enjoy the company of other dogs can be “office assistants” for the staff. If an anxious dog doesn't want to eat, the team will create special concoctions—like warmed up dog food mixed with canned pumpkin and peanut butter—and hand-feed the pups.

MaryMac's plays jazz—fitting, since New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz—or sometimes trap music to help relax everyone inside. Aromas of lavender or eucalyptus waft through the building to calm dogs and people alike.

The doors close to the public from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. every day so the dogs can enjoy uninterrupted naptime.

“During that time, the lights are dimmed to just the chandelier,” McWilliams notes.

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Owners can opt for additional canine enrichment activities like an extended walk, Kong filled with peanut butter, lick mat covered with fresh and frozen fruit, hide and seek, or the “trick of the month.” For about 15 minutes twice a day, the team will teach a dog a cue like *roll over*, *speak*, *walk backward*, or *down* so that day care regulars know a new skill by the end of the month.

Let the Good Times Roll

NOLA is known for *lagniappes*—“a little something extra”—so MaryMac’s often hosts dogs-only theme parties. For instance, Mardi Gras party attendees enjoy posing for photos in costumes and chowing down on dog-friendly king cakes surrounded by festive decorations.

“We are known for our parties,” McWilliams says. “The parties actually sell out fairly quickly. My customers don’t even give new people a chance to come.”

Her loyal clientele is born of the help she’s given so many dogs, like Finn, a pit bull who used to run away from people and dogs with his tail tucked between his legs. Now he’s a “party animal.”

Even Gabbana learned to strut around MaryMac’s with pride until he passed away in 2022. But his legacy lives on at MaryMac’s, from all of the enrichment activities to groomers offering the “Gabbana special”—a dyed mohawk like the little dog used to sport.

“He inspired every service that I



Separation anxiety is often described as a panic attack that happens when dogs are left alone or are apart from a person who is important to them.

Some of the signs are drooling, howling or barking, and destructive behavior.

offer,” McWilliams says.

Those services face huge demand. She’s alarmed by the rise in separation anxiety during the pandemic, which she attributes to so many people working at home during lockdowns; many dogs grew accustomed to never being alone. She hopes readers will practice leaving their dogs alone in a safe space even just for five minutes at a time and build a

support team that includes a positive reinforcement trainer, doggie day care, and a veterinarian.

Of course, if you’re lucky enough to live in New Orleans, you can also drop by MaryMac’s Doggie Retreat, which was featured in the 2024 “Puppy Bowl.” McWilliams finds it rewarding to help people by helping their pets.

“I get so much joy in this,” she says. “I feel like I’m doing my life’s work.” **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

For more information, visit MaryMacsDoggieRetreat.com.