

Media Release

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Hobby leads man who's blind to business ownership



Joe Sexson, of Royal, holds a miniature schnauzer in front of Dream Mountain Kennel.

Joe Sexson of Royal, near Hot Springs, started going blind four years ago and had to change careers. After 40 years as a police paramedic, Sexson is starting a small business born out of a hobby.

He and his wife Susie have started Dream Mountain Kennel. “We always had dogs. We were always dog lovers. When I lost my vision, I had to leave work,” he said. “We got into the dog show circuit. We bought a couple of miniature schnauzers. We thought we knew a lot about dogs until we got in with the professionals.”

They have shown dogs for four years. “We frequently wondered what to do with our other (pet) dogs while we showed our show dogs. Most places were not where we’d want to board our spoiled rotten house dogs – in a big kennel with a bunch of big dogs. We soon realized this was a problem for everyone,” so they started providing specialized dog boarding services. The all-inclusive kennel “does not charge ala carte for necessary services like daily exercise, people time, and special diets” and has space for eight dogs, including two large areas for bigger dogs.

The Sexsons partnered with the Department of Human Services Division of Services for the Blind’s small business program, which helped them develop a realistic business plan and provided start-up funding.

The Sexsons did their research before going into business. They built their kennel using sealed floors, fireproof materials, and, since Arkansas has tornadoes, weatherproof reinforced concrete. They are working on the kennel's certification by the American Kennel Club. "As far as I know, we'll be the only one in Arkansas," Sexson said.

The Sexsons live on the premises and dogs are supervised 24/7. The inside kennels are climate controlled and include a living/play area equipped with radio, television, and recliners. "We wanted to make it as much like being at home as possible," said Sexson. Dogs have individual outdoor covered runs with ceiling fans and doggy doors, so they can go out any time they want. The kennel also has an outdoor area for group play, which helps socialize the dogs.

"It's a dream come true, to be able to work here from our home, doing the work we love," Mrs. Sexson said. She majored in computer programming in college and does their website. She is an accountant and runs the office. Her husband describes her as "the detail person." Mrs. Sexson is also the one who does the dog grooming. Her husband is active in the day to day care of the dogs.

Sexson led a remarkable career before his vision started its decline. He was one of only a few people with dual certification in emergency medical rescue and police work. He served in the Pulaski County Sheriff's office in the 1970's and 1980's. He was co-winner of the National Deputy Sheriff of the Year award and received the National Medal of Valor, both in 1985. He was instrumental in starting the EMS program in Arkansas.

When he was speaking at a conference in Baltimore, he was recruited to be the personal paramedic to the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the royal family. "I traveled the world and lived in the palace. It was a fairytale job."

However, a year later an opportunity he'd wanted for a long time came up and he went to Alaska to fly helicopter rescue. He contracted a serious viral infection from a patient in the Arctic Circle and almost died. He spent weeks in the hospital and the infection went into his eyes. He healed, but he and his wife decided to return to Arkansas to care for her parents.

He became Director of Emergency Services for the city of Hot Springs and was in charge of the ambulance service. He then held similar posts in Fort Smith and Little Rock. When he returned to Arkansas, he also became part of the national Disaster Medical Assistance Team (D-Mat Team) and was called into service for federally declared emergencies, such as the bombing of the World Trade Center and Hurricane Katrina. On August 2 of this year, Sexson was inducted into the Arkansas EMS Hall of Fame.

"It's strange after working emergency services every day to now not being able to drive," said Sexson. He had radial keratotomy (RK) surgery done when the procedure was brand new. It destroyed

his cornea. He received a new cornea from the Arkansas Lions Eye Bank and Laboratory at University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS), but it failed. His second cornea transplant was a success. He had two other surgeries at UAMS. Then later he had cataracts removed in one eye and a lens implant put in the other eye. He had eye problems that developed with scarring from the earlier viral infection. He said his vision declined over the past four years. His insurance had limited coverage for eyes, and he appreciated DSB paying for the eye surgeries, medical treatments, and medications that were not covered by insurance.

DSB provides vocational rehabilitation services to adults who are blind or severely visually impaired and whose goal is successful employment. The division also serves youth and older blind individuals. For information about DSB's programs and services, visit the DSB website at <http://humanservices.arkansas.gov/dsb/Pages/default.aspx> or call 1-800-960-9270, 501-682-5463, or TDD 501-682-0093.