

# HER COLLECTION

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BACK-TO-HER

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HERSTORY

## NICOLA SMITH

A DOG'S BEST FRIEND

# NICOLA SMITH OF WE WAG TORONTO

I had the pleasure of speaking with Nicola, the owner of We Wag Toronto. A company that offers dog walking services in Downtown Toronto, The Beaches, Leslieville/Riverdale and Yorkville. Nicola truly embodies the entrepreneurial spirit. This is HERstory.

## **Tell us about your journey to finding your purpose! How did it start?**

I have always wanted to be an entrepreneur. That spirit took me on a journey that started at a very young age. In elementary school, I made and sold embroidery bracelets, it was so successful that it landed me in trouble with the principal because the parents complained about me selling products on school property.

I went on to make and sell prom dresses in high school; In college, I was scouted and modelled overseas for five years. When I returned to Canada, I started my jewelry line, where I learned about price and cost, which has helped me in my current business. I learned to value myself and what I bring to my business because I undersold myself. I was making one-of-a-kind pieces with semi-precious stones and selling them for a couple of hundred dollars, can you imagine? Two hundred dollars seemed a lot to charge someone at that time. I never factored in my time or cost; eventually, I had to close my business because I was working other jobs to keep my jewelry line alive.

This was when I stepped away from being an entrepreneur feeling like a failure, thinking I wasn't cut out for this life. So, I decided to get a corporate 9-5 PM job with a steady pay cheque. I found one at a start-up. Working there was instrumental in my development and taught me a great deal. I eventually brought those skills and what I learned from my jewelry business to We Wag.

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*In life, you find your people - what works for you and what works for them.*

**What was the moment when you knew it was time for a change?**

I was sitting in an office all day long while my dog was at home being walked by a dog walker or in doggy daycare, and I got to the office when it was dark and left when it was dark. I had to shift my entire thinking, I knew this was not how I wanted to live. So, I took the time to get away and think and asked myself, “what makes you happy?”. That took me back to being a child on the farm when I would wake up at 6 am to take my dogs for their walk before school. I’d take them on long trails and train them. That time brought me so much joy.

The answer to my question of what makes me the happiest was being in nature, being with my dogs and having my own business. That’s when I thought of being a dog walker and wondered if it was a viable business. I did my research and discovered that it was a real possibility. That’s when I quit my job with my comfy salary.

**What challenges/difficulties did you encounter in pursuing your goals?**

People’s perception and resistance. When I resigned from my job, my boss offered me a raise when I told them I wanted to be a dog walker. Friends would ask, “hey, do you want me to ask at my work if they are hiring or do you need a job.” even my electrician had this same sentiment and let me know that he had friends who were looking for help.



People had such a hard time understanding that this was my passion. I love dogs, and I love being outside walking. It made perfect sense to me. I had never thought of this profession for the same reasons. Walking dogs was my stress release, it’s what I did for fun on the weekends. I would take my neighbour’s dogs for the day walking through the city. Even now, people ask if walking dogs is my full-time business.

It started out small, just me, and I thought I might bring on another person. I had evolved quickly and even more over the last two years. This is largely due to the number of people who have gotten dogs over the pandemic. When Covid hit, we had to pivot and extend our walking area to accommodate for the reduction in walks and in doing so, we have been the busiest we have ever been.

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*You can't be all things to all people. You must find your niche, stay in it, and don't make exceptions.*

**What makes you unique in this field?**

We listen to the client's needs and the needs of the dog. We are a combination of people-person and advocates for the dog. I'm always going to do what's best for the dog. For example, if a client wants their dog on a group walk and I know that's not what's best for their dog, I will let them know. Often, that's not what they want to hear, and I am willing to walk away.



I won't create a situation that's not in the dog's best interest to make an owner happy. We see dogs as individuals and treat them as such. I'm here for the long term and want clients who will stick with me. In life, you find your people - what works for you and what works for them.

**What's next for you and WE WAG?**

Dog training is the natural next step in my evolution and my business. I've been doing this for over four years, and it's great. Now I've asked myself what makes me the happiest about this business, it's when I'm doing solo walks, and I see a difference in the dog's behaviour. It translates to me being able to explain to the owners the why behind the behaviour, what I've done to make the difference, and what they can do to continue.

**What is your best "takeaway" advice for anyone interested in starting their own business?**

You need to have strong boundaries. Know that you must put everything into your business when you start. There won't be balance until you establish yourself. Lastly, You can't be all things to all people. You must find your niche, stay in it, and don't make exceptions.

Everything in my life has been about dogs. I live and breathe my business. That's how you make a successful business by completely diving into it. I had a lot of careers, and it took me a long time to get to this point, but that's life. You don't always know where things are going to go, and something just clicks all of a sudden.