

# CUDDLY COMPANIONS MAKE CONGENIAL COWORKERS

By Jim Molis

**L**isa Almeida's beloved boating dog Buddy is more than a pet. He's a part of her business.

His warm welcomes and endearing fondness for visitors, members and employees of **Freedom Boat Club** make him a key contributor to the company's growth.

"If there's a dog lover or an animal lover there's an immediate bond as soon as they come in the door," said Almeida, owner of Freedom Boat Club in Jacksonville and St. Augustine. "It's a great opener to conversations."

A six-year-old golden retriever, Buddy is a trained service dog who sits obediently on boat decks as employees work and joyfully rides along with potential members on test runs.

"He opens people's hearts up and brings them so much joy," Almeida said. "It conveys this image that makes people walk in and say, 'This place is really friendly.'"

Kids fawn over him, making it easier for Almeida to talk with their parents or to get the children to relax on the boat. He gets along with other pets as well, which is important because members can also take their dogs on boats.

"If you're going to be a pet-friendly place you have to make sure your dog can acclimate to all situations and can listen and behave," Almeida said. "You want him to add to the workplace not take away from it."

Buddy knows when to go lay down if employees get busy and when to stay out of the way.

Sammi, an eight-year-old German shepherd, and Tex, a 13-year-old Siberian husky, behave similarly at **Dali Decals**, a Jacksonville-based e-commerce company. The dogs were with Alicia Soret and David Okun when they started the decal business in their home in 2007 and have moved with them to each increasingly larger space as the business has grown.

"Ever since we've been part of an office environment, the dogs have been with us. Not having them with us isn't a question," said Soret, executive director.

The dogs are free to sit in on meetings and roam the 7,500-square-foot office as they choose—except for the production department, where dog hair and sticky decals do not mix. But they do have to stay behind the door of Soret's glass office when delivery people or mailmen arrive.



LISA ALMEIDA









“It’s the only time of day where somebody is going to bother them and you hear them barking,” Okun said.

Though prospective employees are told about the dogs upfront and accommodations are made when visitors are allergic or averse to animals, Sammi and Tex generally evoke positive responses. “Everyone gets to take some pet time,” Okun said.

Employees who bring their dogs to work report lower levels of stress and higher levels of job satisfaction, according to a study by Virginia Commonwealth University. “Pet presence may serve as a low-cost, wellness

intervention readily available to many organizations and may enhance organizational satisfaction and perceptions of support,” stated principal investigator Randolph T. Barker, professor of management, in a university news release.

Having the dogs at work also helps Okun focus. “When we’re in the office for a 10-hour stretch I’m not worrying about going home to take the dogs for a run,” he said.

Realtor **Judy Hicks** of **RE/MAX Coastal Real Estate** works from home with her dog but takes her on business appointments because clients enjoy seeing her so much. “It shows a side of you that people normally would not see until they got to know you,” Hicks said. “It’s an instant way to bond.”



**JUDY HICKS**

Hicks adopted Ali, a black, female Jack Russell terrier, from Brantley Animal Rescue Coalition on Mother’s Day in 2013. She had been looking online for a dog who was the polar opposite of Bama, a brown, male Jack Russell terrier whom she had to have euthanized in December 2012, the night she came home from the hospital following spinal surgery.

“If you’re a dog lover and you have a dog and you lose that dog it’s devastating. You don’t think you’re going to recover,” Hicks said. “But all of a sudden we had this sweet little girl. We love her and she loves us.”

Originally named “Georgia”, Hicks and her husband settled on “Ali” as a compromise. She is a University of Florida Gators fan and he roots for the University of Alabama Crimson Tide, so “Ali” could be short for “alligator” or “Ali Bama”.

Hicks’s passion for college football is matched only by her fervor for pet charities. She regularly hosts client appreciation events at local dog parks and has raised several thousands of dollars for pet charities through the fundraisers. Hicks sends invitations in Ali’s name and even includes her dog on her business card.

“Dogs show the kind of person you are instantly and they’re good for you,” Hicks said. “And if they’re good for you, I would think they’re good for your business.” **A**

