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A fairy tale ends with happy tails

Fetching a franchise. When Heidi Flammang's husband perished in a plane crash, their dream of opening a dog day-care center nearly died. But Camp Bow Wow and her canine crusade are growing by leaps and bounds.

By Douglas Brown
Denver Post Staff Writer

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There's a fairy tale quality to the Heidi Flammang story, so let us begin:

Once upon a time in Colorado, a young woman named Heidi who loved dogs met a young man who also cared very much for pooches. They married and dreamed of opening a daycare "camp" for canines, a place where dogs spend the day frolicking freely - and not stuck in cages - in the company of their barking pals. The couple even toiled evenings together, after work, crafting plans for their first camp.

But the young man, Bion Flammang, died in a plane crash in 1994, just 18 months after they wed.

Heidi was devastated.

Bion's death delivered much insurance money to Heidi, but she felt guilty about it. She treated the money unwisely for a few years, and most of it went away.

One day, when Heidi had only a little bit of money left, her brother told her she needed to drag herself out of the dumps.

"You and Bion wanted to start that doggie day-care center," said her brother. "You need to do that. I'll help."

So Flammang took all of her money and opened Camp Bow Wow, in Denver, in 2000.

People liked Camp Bow Wow, but it struggled nevertheless.

Some days, Flammang thought the business might not survive another week. She quit her other job, the one paying the bills, and focused on turning her camp into something special.

She stuck with it, and now Camp Bow Wow is one of the fastest-growing businesses in the pet industry. There are 45 camps scattered around the country, and another 141 franchises sold and waiting for the government approvals and permits that will allow new camps, where dogs come to play during the day or board while their owners are on vacation, to open.

Flammang, 41, has started a foundation that aims up to find homes for stray dogs, to cure canine cancer and to rescue ill-treated dogs from Greece, where the plight of many mutts could be lifted straight from a horror story.

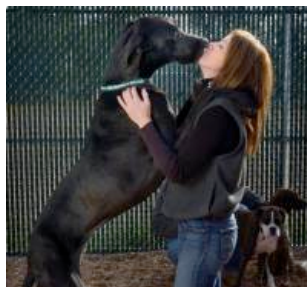
Flammang now is a captain of industry, jetting to New York to interview public relations firms for her book on business, hiring corporate wizards from around the nation to propel Camp Bow Wow forward, appearing on national television to talk up her business.

She has a daughter now, Tori, 12, from a short-lived second marriage, and Tori spends her days after school with Mom in the Camp Bow Wow offices in Boulder.

Tori owns much of Flammang's heart, but a big chunk of it still remains with Bion. And though he may be gone, his spirit, she says, guides



Camp Bowwow founder Heidi Flammang greets the dogs at her Boulder location. Flammang, 40, started the franchise in 2000 out of the tragedy of losing her husband in a plane crash. She has moved on to using her smarts and her money to advance animal and human welfare. (Post / Glenn Asakawa)



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many of her decisions and helps steel her when things grow bumpy.

"He didn't have any fear," Flammang says of Bion. "When things get tough, I'm like, 'Give me a break. Move on. Put it out to the universe and let it get taken care of.'"



Camp Bowwow founder Heidi Flammang relaxes with Marlin, a shepherd mix that was rescued with others from abusive conditions at Greece, in the doggie lounge at her Boulder location. Flammang, 40, started the franchise in 2000 out of the tragedy of losing her husband in a plane crash. She has moved on to using her smarts and her money to advance animal and human welfare. (Post / Glenn Asakawa)

It's been a winning approach.

Fleeing California

She arrived in Colorado from Southern California when she was in middle school. Her parents wanted to "escape the rat race," she says, and so they chose the town of Monument to settle down.

She didn't come from a monied family. Her father owned several small businesses, and with that came the inevitable financial ups and downs.

Growing up, she believed she would be successful. Her dream? Owning her own advertising agency.

Animals captivated her, especially dogs.

"When she was 5, we got Daisy, who looked like Benji," says her father Harvey Haight, who now works for his daughter at Camp Bow Wow. "That little dog was her partner."

She performed well enough in high school to get to the University of Colorado, where she majored in business. But Flammang remained fixed upon dogs, and in Bion she found a partner who shared her enthusiasms.



Camp Bowwow founder Heidi Flammang greets, Malikye, a great dane belonging to a worker at her Boulder location. Flammang, 40, started the franchise in 2000 out of the tragedy of losing her husband in a plane crash. She has moved on to using her smarts and her money to advance animal and human welfare. (Post / Glenn Asakawa)

After Bion died, her dogs at the time - Winny and Mick - "were her best friends," Haight says. "The dogs brought her back to reasoning."

She became involved with service dogs, those dogs used to help people with disabilities. When one of them, a female golden retriever called Orie, flunked the test, Flammang adopted her.

Once Camp Bow Wow became successful, she focused a part of the foundation's mission on canine cancer because Orie died of the disease.

To spend time with Flammang at her downtown Boulder offices and in the only Camp Bow Wow she still owns, in Boulder, is to witness the extension of a passion into a lifestyle.

The corporate offices are decorated in camp theme, with faux-log walls, a flaming fireplace, a tent for dogs and, of course, dogs. Her current dog, Ray Ray, a hulking black Lab, lumbers from room to room, his nails click-clacking on the pet-friendly floors.

Some workers have little gates across their doorways, designed to keep their pets inside, but at least one dog, another Lab, makes great sport out of leaping over the gates into the offices of different executives, who might be on the phone sealing deals while Fido grins and then thrashes a pillow cushion.

Follow Flammang around a doggie day-care camp itself, and you'll see her nuzzle a muscular dog that moments before growled and barked at a visitor.

She'll get down on the ground and kiss an imposing bruiser on the nose and then move on to the next pooch, a fresh scattering of dog hair attached to her brown Camp Bow Wow collared shirt.

She's fully in her element. Dogs surround her. She talks about dogs all day. Her every lick of work hinges, in the end, on the welfare of dogs.

She would like to see 500 Camp Bow Wows by the end of 2009, but rather than chat about business, she'd prefer to talk about those Greek dogs.

A Camp Bow Wow customer returned from a trip to Greece and told Flammang dogs everywhere in the country sit tethered to steel cans and trees.

The customer eventually became Camp Bow Wow's general counsel, she kept talking about the Greek dogs, and she persuaded Flammang to travel to the country and see for herself. Once she was in Greece, it didn't take long for Flammang to embrace the cause.

"The owned dogs are much worse off than the street dogs," she says. "(The owned dogs) can stay chained to trees for years. One dog,

Dmitry, was chained to a tree for five years."

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What began as a reconnaissance mission a few months ago ended up being a rescue expedition, with Flammang returning from the country with 11 dogs on her plane.

The dogs were put up for adoption through Camp Bow Wow. As of press time, all but three had found homes.

"It was life-changing. It was crazy," she says of her sojourn. "The dogs traveled with us for 16 hours on the flight. We had to do it at night because activists don't want to let dogs leave Greece. We told everybody we were leaving two days later. We set them up."

A mission gathers steam

Camp Bow Wow now works with people in Greece who are eager to save dogs. In another few weeks, Flammang says, they are slated to get 10 more dogs. She's encouraging her franchisees to build Bow Wow Buddies Bungalows, where dogs in need of homes, like those from Greece, can stay until they find owners.

"Once you go there, you feel compelled to help," she says. "There are so many organizations here that help, but there's nothing over there."

Between the foundation, with its braid of philanthropic work, and the creeping web of franchises that now describes Camp Bow Wow, Flammang doesn't have much time. She guns around Boulder in her massive black Chevy Tahoe, between the office and her house in the newfangled Holiday neighborhood at the north edge of town and the Camp Bow Wow franchise she owns, but has put up for sale. She doesn't have the time anymore to manage a camp.

"It's been such a crazy ride," she says. "Oh my gosh."

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These are a few of her favorite things

Camp Bow Wow founder Heidi Flammang loves dogs, but she has other favorite things too:

Favorite movies: "Lady and the Tramp," "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants," "The Sound of Music," "Old Yeller" and "High Fidelity"

Favorite actors: John Cusack and Tom Cruise

Favorite vacation: A tropical beach, anywhere, anytime

Favorite books: John Grogan's children's book, "My Dog Marley," and anything by C.S. Lewis

Last book she read: "The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment," by Eckhart Tolle

Favorite food: Sushi

Pets: Ray Ray (black Labrador retriever) and, always, random stray dogs that are looking for permanent homes

Hobbies: Hanging out with my daughter. We go hiking a lot. University of Colorado football (she has season tickets)

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