

A man with a beard, wearing a green polo shirt and dark pants, is smiling and holding a small, fluffy white dog. He is standing in front of a white van. The van has a logo on the hood that says "HDDS" in purple letters, with a small dog icon above it. The background shows a brick building and a large green tree under a clear blue sky.

The Dogfather of Harlem's Pandemic Pup Relief Tour helps pets and people in need.
By Jen Reeder

The Kindest Cuts

Brian Taylor, aka The Dogfather of Harlem, loves bringing people together through dogs. For the past ten years as the owner of Harlem Doggie Day Spa, he's found creative ways to care for dogs while giving back to the community.

Last year, he worked with at-risk kids in New York City, teaching them about the pet industry and grooming. The year before, he organized a canine costume fashion parade: Dogs dressed like their owners, and the winner scored free products and services from local businesses. Taylor raised money to open a community dog park, and his "No Poop Left Behind" campaign led to poop-bag stations being added to parks in his neighborhood.

He also helps find missing dogs and homes for dogs who need them, and volunteers to walk and groom the dogs of seniors having financial issues.

"My shop is a doggie daycare, grooming, boarding, and dog-walking services. I'm always around dogs, so I try to help as many dogs as I can in the community," he says. "When you do more for your community, they support and love you more because of the element of giving back."

Of course, 2020 has been an extraordinarily challenging year. When the coronavirus pandemic caused "nonessential" businesses to shut down in March, Taylor



"I met some extremely, extremely beautiful people down there," says groomer Candice Kurtz of her trip to a homeless encampment in Los Angeles, where volunteers (above) offered free clipping and grooming services. Opposite: "It's just to connect all people of all races through the love of dogs." Brian Taylor and a happy customer, posing in front of his canine beauty parlor on wheels.

lost about 80 percent of his business, including the daycare and boarding. But he could continue offering grooming services by scheduling curbside drop-offs, staggering appointments, and wearing protective gear.

His clients started making donations to help keep Harlem Doggie Day Spa afloat, and to support those who couldn't afford to groom their dogs due to the economic impact of the pandemic. He raised around \$2,000 in April and May and gave away a dozen dog groomings.

Sweet Relief

Then he got his most ambitious idea yet: The Pandemic Pup Relief Tour. Taylor envisioned driving his mobile grooming van across America, giving away free grooming services to dogs whose own-

ers were struggling financially during the pandemic. It would help people care for the dogs who'd helped them emotionally through months of lockdown.

"My personal goal is to capture how America has dealt with this and how their dogs were so important with the whole process," he says. "It's just to connect all people of all races

through the love of dogs."

When he shared his idea with the Facebook group for the Black Groomers Association, the response was immediate and overwhelmingly positive. Shop owners offered to host a stop and groomers volunteered to travel to offer their services for free to support the tour.

So the Pandemic Pup Relief Tour kicked off at



Welcome Waggin': Signing up for a much needed spa day

TOP: COURTESY CANDICE KURTZ; BELOW AND OPPOSITE: TAYLOR SMITH



Janelle Russell, of Fayetteville, Georgia, brought in 16 volunteers who groomed more than 150 dogs in two days.

Harlem Doggie Day Spa on July 11–12, 2020. Then it moved to Les Pawtites Pet Care in Mount Rainier, Maryland; Show Quality Grooming in Wilmington, North Carolina; Chateau 4 Paws in Fayetteville, Georgia; Pawsome Pets in Lewisville, Texas; and concluded at Blue Pooch in Los Angeles, California, from August 12–13.

The tour was a resounding success: 59 groomers and 24 bathers and other volunteers groomed a whopping 617 dogs and gave services like nail trims to another 75 dogs—all for free.

“When you take all that hair out, dogs weigh less and their skin is breathing with fresh air and they feel good about themselves,” Taylor says. “Then they get in your bed and you can kiss and hug them. You feel

good about yourself because you’ve been able to treat this dog that helped you through



Sheer Joy: Candice Kurtz offered her time and talent at Pandemic Pup Relief Tour stops in New York and Los Angeles.

the last three months of lockdown.”

Janelle Russell, managing director and CEO of Chateau 4 Paws in Fayetteville, Georgia, hosted the tour’s biggest stop, with 16 volunteers from nearby Atlanta as well as states like Ohio, Tennessee, and Florida grooming over 150 dogs in two days.

“We heard a lot of amazing stories from people who lost their jobs, and it was just giving them a relief to be able to get their dogs groomed without having to pay a price for it,” she says.

One woman who had been furloughed brought in six Maltese who were badly matted. Because she was technically still employed (though not earning a sala-

ry), she was having trouble getting unemployment benefits when she needed them.

“The dogs came in looking one way and left looking like a million dollars,” she recalled. “You could see the weight lifted off her.”

Fluff Daddy’s Promise

Russell said the first hour was a little rocky while trying to get 16 groomers used to a new location. But soon everyone came together to work as a team. While Taylor handled customer check-ins at the front, she oversaw the work in the back, including nail grinding, full-body cuts, and baths. She felt strongly that even though the services were free, standards needed to stay high.

“I’m very picky, and everyone did great,” she says. “Everybody enjoyed it.”

Michael Joe, aka. Fluff Daddy, co-administers the Black Groomers Association’s Facebook page and owns Michael Joe’s Alpha Dog Mobile Grooming in Little Elm, Texas. Joe typically surprises clients a few times a week by comping services and saying simply, “Y’all have a blessed week,” so when he saw Taylor’s post about the Pandemic Pup Relief Tour, he instantly knew he wanted to help.

“I know people personally who have suffered from this pandemic and who are still suffering,” he says. “So I just said, You know what? This is the perfect time for this to kick off.”



Fluff Daddy (right) and a volunteer tame an unruly mane. He traveled to three stops on the tour.

Joe traveled to volunteer his grooming services at three stops: Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas. He was surprised by how many strangers opened up to him during the tour, whether sharing stories of their dogs or about their experiences with the pandemic.

“Just seeing that pain behind their eyes, it was very touching,” he says.

Joe also loved caring for the dogs (“To me, they are just like infants. They are innocent creatures.”) and the chance to highlight Black-owned businesses. He said the Black Groomers Association offers a safe place for African American groomers to share tips and advice with one another in a field traditionally lacking in diversity.

“They needed a space where they could be themselves and not be judged because of how they may say something or how they may talk,” he says. “I mean, why should we be treated any different?”

Joe came home from the Pandemic Pup Relief Tour exhausted but fulfilled. When Taylor organizes a

future tour, he’s already promised, “Fluff Daddy will be there.”

Mother of Invention

Candice Kurtz opened her mobile grooming business, KandiKutz House Call Pet Grooming Salon, in June 2020. She’d worked as a groomer in a salon for 14 years, but when it closed during the pandemic for six weeks straight, the single mother of three realized she needed to do something to provide financial stability for her family in case of future shutdowns. So she invested in portable equipment like bathtubs and tables to provide no-contact grooming in clients’ backyards.

“It just really took off,” she says. “I’m very, very grateful.”

When she heard about the Pandemic Pup Relief Tour, she committed to helping Taylor in New York at Harlem Doggie Day Spa. The turnout and the gratitude of clients was so overwhelming that she decided to also join the tour in Los Angeles.

In L.A., the team was handling demand smoothly

so she and another groomer asked Taylor if they could offer their services in the Skid Row neighborhood, which has one of the largest homeless populations in the United States. They arrived at a tent encampment, offering nail trims and full grooms.

“I met some extremely, extremely beautiful people down there,” she says.

“We’ve seen people down there that were giving their food—where it looked like they hadn’t eaten in days—to their dogs, just so their dogs had something. That motivated us to take money out of our own pockets and go and buy dog food and food supplies for the people as well, snacks and water, and to go back down on the second day.”

Kurtz was surprised by how many young African Americans messaged her through social media during the Pandemic Pup Relief Tour asking for advice about grooming and how to get started in the industry.

“I wasn’t getting those types of questions before the tour, before we were presented out as like, ‘Hey, we’re here. We do good work and we like to give back.’ But I think that’s important too, because representation is important and it was important for people to see us—that we do exist, and to be counted in,” she says. “It just all around was an amazing opportunity.”

She enjoys encouraging the next generation of groomers because she loves working with dogs so much.

“I feel free when I groom—no burdens, no stress. Everything is gone and it’s just me and my equipment and the dog,” she says. “We’re going to have a great time and get a good haircut out of it. ... I literally want to be carried out with my scissors in my hand on the way to my deathbed. I love this.”

The chance to help both homeless people as well as those who’d lost their incomes during the pandemic meant the world to Kurtz.

“One, it was humbling, and two, it felt good to know that just my talent is enough to be able to make a difference in somebody’s life, even if it was just something as small as giving your dog a great haircut,” she says. “I owe it all to Brian. This whole event was awesome. I really can’t say enough great things about it.” **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She works from her home office in Colorado with her beloved dogs, Rio and Peach.

For more information, visit:
PupReliefTour.com
 or
HarlemDoggieDaypa.com.