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West Michigan K9 Is Coming to Fruitport

by Kate and Kimmie Holtrop

Formed in 2013 by Stephen Parent, West Michigan K9 built its first major facility in West Olive, Michigan, in August of 2016. Their need for a new facility arose when their current one was already at full capacity after eight weeks in business. In 2019, after serious conversations about what the company needed, the process of purchasing land and drawing up blueprints for a new facility began.

The new facility will be constructed near the highway at 4800 Airline Road, near The Storage Group and the Noah Project. WMK9 hopes their Fruitport building will be complete and open for business by fall of 2022. There will be many more new jobs available at the new facility than at the old one. The company is planning to create about fifty new jobs for the community, along with more new positions for the winter internship program. The new facility will offer a dog park, an agility field, and a full veterinary clinic. Parent chose Fruitport for the new location because most of the company's customers are here. Mr. Parent is looking to further expand WMK9 by building another facility in Detroit, as well as one in Traverse City, over the next 12-16 months.

"Our goal is to create the best relationship with your dog. Obedience with a whisper." This mission statement is proven by their management of diversity among dogs like a teacher manages students. WMK9 approaches every dog as an individual. Within a minute or two, the trainer can discover what specific motivation drives each dog. Trainers are able to combine individualized techniques with a cookie-cutter approach to training in order to get dogs trained effectively in a matter of a few weeks.

As part of the company's work with the US government, WMK9 will provide special kennels at the new facility to house dogs being trained for the Department of Defense and law enforcement. WMK9 will also have 15 positions at the new facility specifically for training these dogs.

The WMK9 Foundation, the company's non-profit branch, has donated dogs to the Wyoming County Police Department, to veterans, and to the military. When providing animals to the government, WMK9 is very selective in terms of breed and skill set. Trainers run their puppies through stress tests, to determine not only their reactions to stress, but also whether they will be able to hunt for their own food.

The winter internship program provided by WMK9 allows people who are interested in learning more about dog training, or just curious about the company's methods, to have a hands-on experience in dog training. From senior citizens, to professionals looking for a career change, to high school seniors, people of all ages and abilities are welcome to apply for the internship program.

"The pandemic definitely had its impact," said Mr. Parent. WMK9 completely shut down in March, 2020, for three months. All the employees, however, were kept on the payroll. The company opened back up in June, 2020, to a fully booked schedule for summer training. Mr. Parent said that they have been booked ever since. WMK9's customer interactions changed over the pandemic, going from allowing people into the facility to keeping most of their interactions outdoors.

Though the company never did a lot of online or Zoom calls initially, they have found throughout the pandemic that using Zoom saves time for not only themselves, but for their clients as well. They also discovered that they can train dogs equally well over Zoom, almost like performing the training in person. The online training process involves teaching owners to train their own dogs.

WMK9 has received the 2022 Veteran-Owned Small Business of the Year Award, which was presented to them by Michigan Celebrates Small Business. They will be acknowledged as having received the Award at the annual MCSB Gala on May 3.

To contact WMK9, just call (616) 953-3504 Monday through Friday, 9am to 5pm, or go to their website at www.westmichigank9.com/contact-us/. WMK9 can also be found on Facebook and Instagram.

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