

## **Oakland: Toying with idea for pup pacifier, couple invent KongTime doggy dispenser**

- Harriet Chiang, Chronicle Staff Writer

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When Maureen Hoye brought home a young dog from the local animal shelter, the pup -- named Carly -- immediately nuzzled her way into the family, bonding with Hoye's sons and the family cat.

But when Carly was left home alone while Hoye and her husband were at work and the boys were at school, she became a chewing machine. She gnawed her way through a garden hose, a laundry basket and a broom. She even pulled out the backyard fence posts and the lattice work.

The Alameda dog owner was at her wits' end when a neighbor recommended that she try out KongTime, a toy-dispensing device that helps keep dogs entertained.

Created by a pair of Berkeley entrepreneurs, the motorized KongTime randomly dispenses rubber toys stuffed with treats, giving dogs hours of quality chewing time. Its creators call it the world's first canine home entertainment center.

"It changed everything," said Hoye, who obtained a prototype of KongTime four years ago. The spouting toys broke up the monotony of Carly's day, and her destructive behavior soon stopped. "Now she is such a good dog," Hoye said as she patted the black-and-caramel-colored shepherd mix.

KongTime, which went on the market in July, is the brainchild of Sandi Thompson, a dog trainer for 20 years. Over the years she had dealt with many dogs who suffered from separation anxiety when they were left by themselves for hours at a time.

"Most of the home-alone issues are because the dog is bored," said the Berkeley trainer, noting that dogs, especially young ones bursting with energy, are social animals. "If they don't get mental or physical stimulation they start improvising any way they can."

She and her boyfriend, Dave Rucker, an engineer and also a dog owner, decided to invent a device that would serve as a "dog pacifier," keeping dogs entertained and out of trouble throughout the day.

They started with a Kong, an immensely popular toy recommended by veterinarians and dog trainers. Shaped like a triple ice-cream cone, a Kong is made of a special rubber with a hollow inside that allows a dog to gnash to its heart's content without breaking the toy.

Depending on the dog, a Kong toy can keep a canine occupied for at least an hour, especially if it's stuffed with treats and then frozen.

Thompson and Rucker approached Joe Markham, founder and CEO of Kong Co., about collaborating on a contraption to dispense Kong toys at intervals.

The original prototype was big and heavy, a 50-pound box made of plywood, rubber bands and a couple of timers. "It was built like a Sherman tank," Thompson recalled.

They eventually worked out the kinks by testing versions on dog owners. The device had to be battery-operated so a dog couldn't chew the cord. It also had to have a preview beep to alert the dog before the toy came spilling out.

"Some dogs were so transfixed with the machine that they wouldn't leave," Thompson said, noting that it was a particular problem with Border collies. By having a warning beep, the dog could relax and romp in the yard in between toys.

It also had to be simple. They had one model with various controls so it could be adjusted to different times of the day. "We found out that nobody wanted it," Rucker said. "They wanted a single button."

Almost five years, eight prototypes and hundreds of thousands of dollars later, they finally came up with KongTime.

The 10-pound dispenser resembles an enclosed fruit bowl made of sturdy plastic with a round frosted-glass cover and four bright red Kong toys nestled in a motorized carousel. Toys spout out over a four- or eight-hour period.

Hoye bought one a couple of months ago when Carly had a brief relapse and chewed up one of the front window plantation shutters. Hoye's 13-year-old twins, Michael and Brendan, use it as a feeder as well as a toy, stuffing the toys with kibble and treats, smearing the ends with peanut butter to seal it.

To show how it works, Hoye stuffed a couple of the rubber toys with treats and placed them in a KongTime, which was sitting on a kitchen table.

She pressed the button. Beeeeeeep.

The machine whirred as the carousel turned, a flap went down and a toy tumbled out and bounced onto the floor.

Carly trotted over, picked up the toy and walked into the next room. She spent the next half-hour protectively holding it between her paws as she gnawed on it, tail wagging.

Every once in a while she would toss it around before flopping down and resume chewing.

"Now it's insurance, which is what I was hoping for," Hoye said, noting that the device quickly quelled Carly's anxiety spurt. "It's pricey, but when you compare the damage, it's nothing."

The suggested retail price is \$129 for a KongTime with medium-size toys or \$139 for one equipped with large toys.

Michael Levy, founder and president of Pet Food Express, a pet supply chain that operates only in the Bay Area, said that his store managers initially were skeptical whether the device would sell because of the price. But he says they've sold quite a few, especially when they discounted the item to \$99 and \$89.

"KongTime is more than just a toy or a novelty," said Levy, a former dog trainer. "It's a training aid in working with behavioral problems."

Janis Bradley, an instructor at the San Francisco SPCA Dog Trainers Academy, prefers to call it an "environmental enrichment." She's used it for the past three months to keep her greyhound, Henry, entertained when she's gone for long periods of time, stuffing it with baby food and freezing it. "He doesn't bark or cry or whine because he's waiting for his Kong toy."

The device has become so popular that editors at Dog Fancy magazine have named it one of their top toys of 2005. "Obviously we thought it was great," editor Susan Chaney said. "The smarter the dogs are, the harder it is to entertain them."

Hoye and her family are happy that they've got a sweet dog and intact furniture. "If you have any behavioral problems, you don't get rid of the pet," she said. "You try and fix it. It's lucky that this came along and fixed it."

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Learn more

For information about KongTime, call (510) 420-1820 or visit [www.kongtime.com](http://www.kongtime.com).

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