

New series!

WORKING WITH CATS

Chase your Dreamies

In the second part of our Working with Cats series, Caroline Cook spends the day with The London Catsitter, Joel Barnett.

There are few on this planet brave enough to follow their ambitions, especially when those ambitions seem a little 'out there', so it's particularly inspiring to talk to people who took a leap of faith to do what they love — people like Joel Barnett.

It's been four years since Joel walked out of his job as an estate agent to pursue a career working with cats. Now, as well as working with London's cat charities, he's growing his reputation with the capital's cat owners — who know him better as The London Catsitter.

"I genuinely love cats — I always have, ever since

"I HAD CHASED THE MONEY AND NOT MY HAPPINESS — SO I LEFT AND STARTED DOING WHAT I WANTED TO DO."

I was little," Joel tells Your Cat when we join him as assistant cat sitters for the day. "I remember begging my mum for a cat when I was about seven. She didn't think I could stick with the commitment, and said if I did all the washing-up for two months, we could get a cat... So I did, and we got Lucy. I was an only child and Lucy was like a sibling to me.

"I always wanted to work with cats but I had been told there was no money in it, so I went into estate agency. I had

chased the money and not my happiness — so I left and started doing what I wanted to do."

While volunteering at Catcuddles, a London-based cat sanctuary, and

Battersea Cats and Dogs Home, Joel set up The London Catsitter on the side, gradually building his client base and an array of kitty friends.

HIGH-END SERVICE

Joel's services are split into three: silver, gold and overnight. He explains: "When I first started up, I offered 20-, 40- and 60-minute visits, but it was too complicated: most people just want you there for 30 minutes or an hour. It depends on what sort of cat they have though — some will want more time and attention than others."

Although his customer base varies, Joel finds that most of his owners are professional couples or young men. Regardless, he has a meet-and-greet session with each client and their cat before taking on a job.

"You can feel like you're under

interrogation by the owners sometimes," he smiles. "It really is like a job interview every time, because they want to know that you're going to look after their cat properly while they're away.

"People think that cat sitting is quite a zen job but there's lots of responsibility in it. Cats are part of the family and someone's house is usually their biggest



Dixie enjoys the catnip bubbles.



Joel has a cuddle with Spirit.

Joel's cat sitter survival kit:

- Eye wipes
- Lint roller and brush
- Hand sanitiser
- Assorted treats
- Poo bags
- Laser pointer
- Ribbon and catnip paper (for makeshift toys on the move!)
- Loose catnip
- Catnip bubbles
- Travel pet first aid kit
- Portable speaker
- Umbrella
- Two chargers
- Two tablets — one for photos and emails, and another for cat music streaming.

possession, so there has to be a lot of trust. I take my job very seriously and I'm always very professional with the responsibility I'm given."

All visits include a change of food and water, litter tray cleaning and refilling, grooming if necessary, and plenty of kitty cuddles (including a stealthy health check!).

Our first stop of the day is in Bromley, where we drop in on Ringella, a very shy, eight-year-old black cat. She's so shy, in fact, that she can't show her face to the Your Cat camera — but Joel isn't fazed, and does his utmost to encourage her to socialise: playing relaxing cat music, sprinkling catnip, and trying to tempt her from behind the curtain with treats and a soft voice.

Joel's service is greatly enhanced by Time To Pet software — a nifty app for both him and his clients, allowing owners to see exactly when he visits their home (including GPS tagging) and receive email updates on how their furry friend is doing. Joel also makes sure he uploads photos each day to his client's files so they can see what their furry friend has been up to while they're away.

"I'm always open about what happens," Joel says as he emails Ringella's owners about her hesitation to say hello. "You never know if some behaviour might point to a medical problem, so I always mention anything out of the ordinary."

FUR-EVER FRIENDS

After a quick hop across the Thames to Newham, it's easy to see the relationship Joel has with his kitty clients. Our next visit is Spirit, another indoor-only cat aged 10 years.

As soon as we enter the flat, Spirit comes to greet us while Joel busies himself with her food, water and litter. Once the general care jobs are done, it's time to give Spirit some fuss. Joel plays cat music and blows catnip bubbles for the grey and white cat, before pulling ribbon and catnip paper out of his backpack of feline wonders to make an on-the-spot chase toy.

Spirit seems a bit itchy, so Joel pays extra attention to her ears during the health check, and emails her owners to tell them he'll keep an eye on her scratching over his next few visits.

Once Spirit's half-an-hour is up, it's time to head south of the river again to see two young rapsallions that Joel



Joel checks Spirit's ears.

has sat since they were kittens: beautiful black brothers, Dixie and Dinky, who live in Greenwich.

Not too fussed about cuddles, the cheeky duo are more interested in play-scrapping and chasing catnip bubbles — not to mention taking particular interest in Joel's shoelaces!

"They used to be really affectionate when they were kittens," he recalls. "But now they're stubborn teenagers who are too cool for cuddles!"

Joel says the second part of his visits are his favourite part of the job: "When you've changed their food and made sure everything is fine, and you get to sit and play with the cats or give them cuddles, everything goes very calm. It's definitely the best bit!"

"Not every cat wants to play and they don't always want to cuddle, so it's about getting to know them and doing what makes them happy. I haven't met a cat I don't like yet, although sometimes they won't seem too bothered that you've visited!"

"PEOPLE THINK THAT CAT SITTING IS QUITE A ZEN JOB BUT THERE'S LOTS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN IT."

Joel points out that cat sitting isn't just about cuddling cats, and he's keen to see the industry become regulated so that professionals such as himself can prove their legitimacy.

He adds: "I know how much responsibility and trust an owner gives me when they hand over the keys to their house — so I definitely agree that regulation should be in place.

"People are more bothered about pet welfare these days — they're no longer leaving their cats alone with a mountain of dry food for three days. I couldn't have done this job 20 years ago, so it's great to see people taking pet ownership more seriously." ■



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Joel feeds Dixie and Dinky in the garden.