

Keeping Tight, if Numb, Grip on the Leash

EACH day Danny DeLarosa readies for battle as he combats a frigid winter with a body armor of clothes. Three layers of socks (one thermal, two cotton) warm his feet so they do not feel as if "they're going to fall off." Three pairs of pants—Lycra leggings, a layer of fleece and jeans—keep his legs from freezing. Four shirts, a hooded sweatshirt and a coat warm his chest against below-zero wind chills.

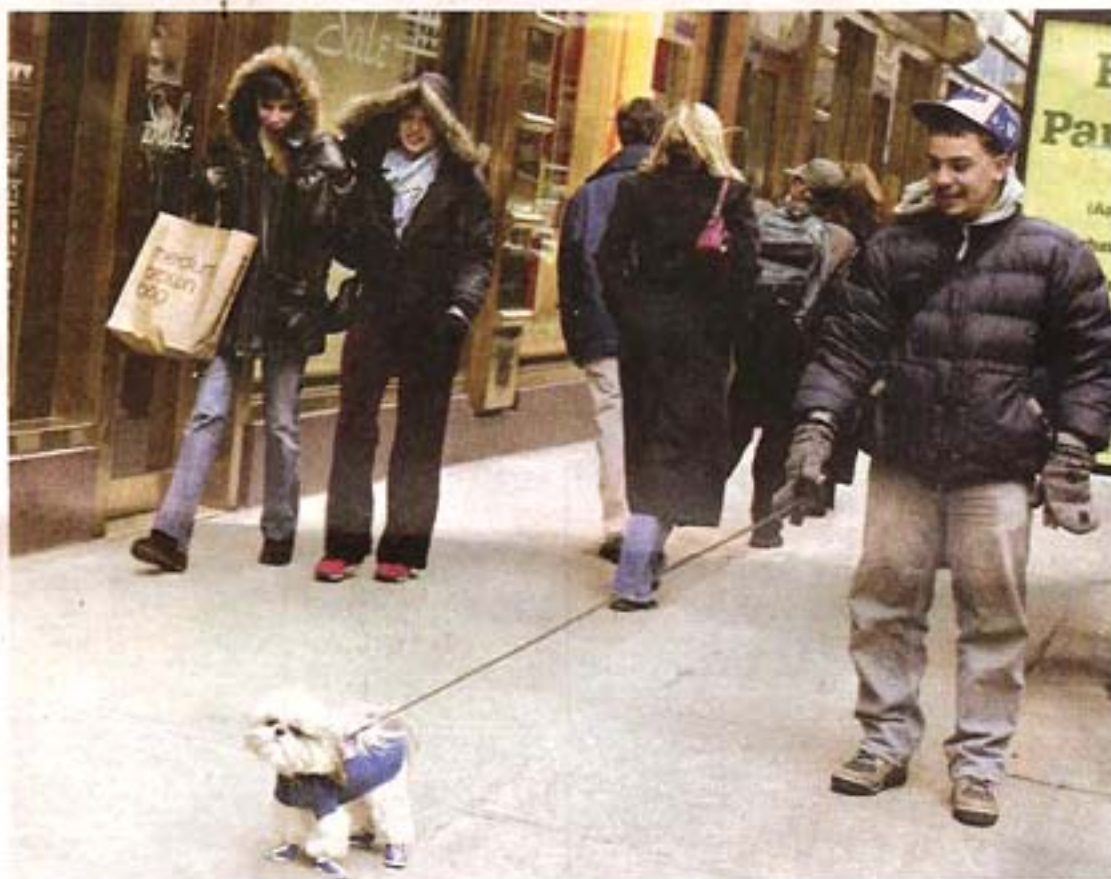
"As long as I can keep my chest, throat and head warm," said Mr. DeLarosa, 27, manager of Walkee Doggie, a dog walking and sitting service in Manhattan, he has a fighting chance against the elements. Still, despite all his protection against the cold, including earmuffs, thermal boots and wool gloves, he sometimes loses the war.

Like every New Yorker, Mr. DeLarosa is coping with a particularly rough winter. The National Weather Service said January's average temperature was just 24.7 degrees. But unlike the occupations of most of the city's 3.5 million workers, who suffer arctic conditions only during their commutes, his job, which pays \$20 an hour, requires that he withstand the brutal cold and spend as many as seven hours a day outdoors.

Workers like Mr. DeLarosa have their strategies for dealing with the cold. Messengers linger in lobbies when they drop off packages. Coffee cart vendors warm hands with portable heaters. A former traffic officer recalled chewing hot peppers to ward off bitter cold as he directed cars and people through Manhattan. But those tactics offer little comfort when a job involves trudging through snow—more than two feet above normal for the season so far—or enduring single-digit days, eight in January alone.

Still, as Mr. DeLarosa has discovered, cold weather can mean opportunity as well. Since the start of this winter, business at Walkee Doggie has increased 25 percent, said Seth Edelstein, the company's owner, who charges hourly rates of \$14 for a group walk of three dogs and \$25 for a walk with just one owner's dogs.

Whether people who land jobs in an improving economy are suddenly deciding to buy those \$600 Labradors they have always wanted, or victims of job cuts are taking in four-legged companions for daily support, Mr. Edelstein can't say for sure. But "since Labor Day, our growth has been exception-



Nancy Siesel/The New York Times

Danny DeLarosa, manager of a Manhattan dog walking service, says one way the cold makes his job tougher is the struggle to put booties and coats on some clients' dogs.

al, as much as 30 percent," he said. "We've had more puppies in the last 6 months than the last 14 months." That, combined with slushy streets and low temperatures, has meant more business for his company.

In addition, Mr. DeLarosa, who oversees the other dog walkers and schedules their rounds, said clients are asking that their dogs be walked more times per day or week than usual. A rise in winter travel, perhaps due to a better economy, is part of the reason. "People are less inclined to send their dogs off to a kennel if they do travel," Mr. Edelstein said, adding to the increase in sitting services. It is too cold for many boarded dogs to play outside, and the thought of their pets confined to kennels is too much for some owners to bear. But even among those not booking vacations, many dog owners do not want the bother of walking their pets on a 10-degree Saturday morning.

That's good for business, but it also means more challenges for Mr. DeLarosa. Recently, he slipped and fell to his knees try-

ing to control a Weimaraner unable to get traction on an icy sidewalk.

And his days are longer as well. His time spent with each dog may stretch by 15 minutes, adding up to two hours more per day, especially if he is battling with dogs to strap on coats and protective booties. "Once the booties are on it's no problem. But putting them on, it's a fight," said Mr. DeLarosa, referring to one 5.3-pound Shih Tzu, who puts up a fierce struggle daily against the \$100 booties and cashmere sweaters his owner insists he wear in such low temperatures.

A dog who wins the bootie war still loses, however, since Mr. DeLarosa has to clean its paws of rock salt, which burns pads.

Mr. DeLarosa relishes the refuge that subway rides from client to client give him against 21-mile-an-hour winds that burn and crack his hands. Still, even in the worst weather, he loves his job. "I love that I'm outside and no one's overseeing me." And even the most high-maintenance breeds are good company, he said. "I love dogs, period."