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Anoka firm hopes to be the top dog in mold inspection business

By Brian Johnson/F&C Staff Writer

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Tony McFarland's star employee used to be locked up in the state of Florida. The employee's business card states that he plays tug of war, steals pizza and enjoys hide-and-seek. And he's not too fond of squirrels.

His name is Watson, and he has established himself as Minnesota's first mold-sniffing dog. A former "inmate" at the North Pinellas Humane Society in Clearwater, Fla., Watson (yes, he really has a business card) has become a valuable asset for McFarland's Anoka-based mold inspection business.

Mold Masters Inc. offers initial mold inspections and follow-up tests for homeowners, businesses, property managers and other clients. Founded in January, the five-employee company already has served 100 to 150 customers and expects more business as concern over "toxic mold" rises.

Watson, a 2-year-old smooth-coated fox terrier, can find mold just about anywhere in a structure — behind the walls, under the carpet, even in the ceiling — and he's not shy about sharing his discoveries with his handlers. As soon as he gets a whiff of the objectionable contaminant, Watson excitedly paws at the appropriate location and is rewarded with a treat.

Mold Masters charges a \$295 flat fee for the use of Watson, plus \$65 for the handler, for an initial inspection. If mold is detected, Mold Masters can remove the mold, take a sample and send it to a lab for testing, or work with a third party on a remediation plan.

Inspections aren't intended exclusively for existing buildings. McFarland said contractors in other parts of the country are hiring mold dogs to sniff out projects under construction, because building materials are sometimes exposed to moisture and can cause problems down the road.

"We can come in and inspect that premises and find mold while it's in its early stage of growth, and eliminate it before it causes more harm," McFarland said.

McFarland owns two commercial cleaning companies — McFarland Hanson and Tower Cleaning Systems — and has worked with indoor mold for 30 years. On a volunteer basis, he worked on more than 40 water-damaged homes in the Grand Forks area after the 1997 floods.

Floods and other natural disasters have always made big headlines. However, mold didn't really hit home with the public until three to five years ago, when it was connected to health problems ranging from hay fever to memory loss.

Sensing the public's concern, McFarland decided to form a third company that would deal specifically with mold and water damage problems. He joined forces with Watson after running across a Web site from the Florida Canine Academy, which trains dogs to detect mold and other substances.

Rebecca Rasmussen, Watson's primary handler, said Watson works for food, but rewards aren't always necessary. According to Rasmussen, the energetic terrier sometimes continues to "hit" on mold even after he has filled up on treats.

"I'll walk him by and he'll still hit on an area," Rasmussen said. "He thinks it's fun."

He's also good at his job, as he proved during a recent demonstration at an office building.

"Every single spot that he hit at, somebody at a desk close by would say, 'That's where the coffee maker used to be, it would spill all the time.' Things like that," Rasmussen said.

On another job, Watson was brought in to inspect a building that had visible mold in the basement, but no signs of mold upstairs.

“We went into an auditorium with 200 or so chairs, and he’s hitting on 40 chairs,” McFarland said. “The people said, ‘We brought those chairs up from downstairs.’ The chairs didn’t have visible mold on them, but they had the spores from the visible mold.”

McFarland has tried several times to trick Watson. He thought he had “gotten” Watson last week, when he and Rasmussen brought the talented canine through a location that appeared to have mold. The dog didn’t react, so McFarland took some samples to see what type of mold Watson was missing.

“I went out and got my sample equipment, ran back in and started scraping,” he said. “It wasn’t mold — it was paint. *He got me.*”

Watson’s trainer, Bill Whitstine, has been training dogs for more than 15 years. His pupils include about 200 bomb and drug dogs, more than 120 dogs trained to find termites in homes and an arson dog that has been featured on the Animal Planet channel.

Tovey Giezentanner, a consultant who works for Whitstine’s Florida-based company, Mold Dog, said the insurance industry approached Whitstine about five years ago and asked him if it would be feasible to train dogs to detect chemicals associated with toxic mold.

Whitstine did some research and the results were positive. Last September, he sold his first batch of mold dogs and has sold about 35 to date to clients in different parts of the country. By the end of the year, he expects the total to reach 75 to 100.

Labs, terriers, beagles and other breeds have been trained as mold dogs. The dogs, which sell for about \$12,000, require 600 to 1,000 hours of training, plus annual refresher courses. They should be energetic and friendly, with a high “prey drive.”

They don't require a pedigree. Whitstine gets all of his dogs from the animal humane society, according to Giezentanner.

"These are rescued dogs," he said.

Giezentanner said dogs are ideal mold detectors because they have a great sense of smell. And unlike air testing — a more common method of finding indoor mold — dogs can pinpoint the precise location of the contaminant.

"If you can pinpoint, that allows the remediators to write a very specific remediation plan, a localized plan, which of course saves you from tearing out walls," Giezentanner said.

McFarland agrees.

"A lot of the equipment they use for testing tests in parts per million," he said.

"The dog outclasses that by a large margin. And the other thing about a dog is that, if he smells mold, you know you have it.

"On the other hand, we've had homes that we've walked through and he hasn't hit on anything serious. And we know that that building's clear. It would be very hard for a certified industrial hygienist to be able to find any mold in that building if the dog has cleared it. I haven't seen it yet."

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