Interview with Janice, ((pseudonym) – pet pig keeper.

30th June 2022 – phone.

Researcher = [K]

K: Why did you decide to have a pet pig?

P: I don’t know, I wanted one for quite a while. I worked on cruise ships so I wasn't able to anyway. Then COVID hit and I left cruise ships and I thought, this is the time to get a pig because I'm actually going to be at home. Then, I did lots of research before and then went ahead with it basically.

K: and what was the interest with pigs in particular?

P: I guess it was like when you see it all on Instagram and things and they look tiny and cute, but it’s not the case is it!?

K: Did you know that going into it?

P: Yeah, I knew he wouldn’t be as small as that but I didn’t think he’d be as big as he is right now! [laughs]

K: How did you find your pig?

P: so, I did lots of research and went to a place near me to view some. It was a farm and basically said ‘My pigs are fully grown, this is the size they will be’. They were quite small, basically the size that [Walter] is now. I though that was a good size. Then I kinda caught him out, I asked him where he got his pigs from initially. He said another farm that I'd already seen, so I messaged them and said “there’s a man near me who’s got these pigs, he said he got them from you” and they said “yeah he did, 8 months ago”. So, these pigs were not fully grown, and he was lying to me to make them look smaller. You think you get this tiny pig and it’s not.

K: So what else did you do for the arrival of [Walter]?

P: So I had to follow all the regulations, get a CPH number registered, I applied for that. I had to apply for an APHA licence which is the walking license. You basically plot your route, you have to avoid things like cafes, any food places, farms and things. So, I plotted my routes and sent them off and they sent someone round to assess the routes and then a vet authorized it. They gave me the route and I have to stick to it and I'm not allowed to deviate, but I've got two walking routes. We’ve got a herd number, so he’s got a tag in his ear, that’s a legal requirement. Outside, I'm quite lucky I've got a big area. I live on my own and I have like an outhouse out the back, size of like a single garage, so I put a stable door on it and filled it with straw. He’s got a mud pit, but he doesn’t like mud. He's got a paddling pool, but he doesn’t like water. He’s got the yard to run around in and the front garden and he goes for a walk every day like you would with a dog.

K: How did you find information about how to care for a pig before you took him home?

P: Just the internet really, the place I got him from, [the breeder], she gives you like a pig course when you get the pig. She did it kind of over the phone with me, but they’re kinda easy to care for.

K: What things did you learn?

P: Basically like the restrictions, the regulations, so like don’t feed them food out your kitchen. It might be tempting to give them your scraps but it’s actually illegal, you’re not allowed. So, things like that basically. Your pig must be chipped. The legal requirements, what to feed them, and how much to feed them. Obviously, if you feed them too much they just blow up. They never stop eating!

K: In the first few weeks how did you adjust to life with your new pet?

P: Erm I found him really easy to care for. I have a Pomeranian too, she’s 11 and I've had her from a puppy. It took me months to potty train her, it took me literally a couple days to potty train [Walter]. I think he’s only ever had two accidents in the house. He’s so intelligent, so easy to train, I get him to do tricks, and he’s got a really good recall. If you put the time into them, they’re amazing and the most well-behaved dog! He’s brilliant.

K: So you had to put in a lot of time to teach him?

P: Yeah, a lot of time and I used food. I never punish him, but I use food as an incentive.

K: What’s your day-to-day routine with him?

P: In the morning I will take my Pomeranian out for a walk, he comes with me too. We just go down to the local park before I go to work. I have 7 and a half hour shifts, so I take them both out, a quick run on the field. Same again when I get home. They get fed after each walk too. On days where I'm off, I will take them to the beach which is my other walking route, and we’ll spend a good hour or so there.

K: Does your relationship with your dog and with your pig differ?

P: A little bit. I’ll let the dog upstairs and, on the bed, but I can’t really do that with the pig. He has been on the bed but because he is outside and in mud, he normally has muddy trotters. You could potentially if he was an indoor pig and you could treat him more like a dog, but I do like him to have his pig time as well, where he can rummage around and stuff. So, I like him to have both.

K: Do you live alone?

P: So, at the time I got [Walter] I was engaged, and we got him together. Since then we broke up, so yeah I live on my own with [Walter]!

K: How does he fit into your life?

P: He fits in like a dog would. If you go away on holiday, you’d get a dog sitter wouldn’t you? So, I've got a pig sitter, my friend from work moves into my house and pig sits for me. I’m quite big on travelling so I'm lucky my friend will come and look after him.

K: is there anything that surprised you about having a pet pig at first?

P: I did have a little episode of aggression from him, he was testing the waters. I’d probably say he was about 4 months old. I spoke to the breeder who told me to put him outside and don’t let him inside. Which, I found really unhelpful really. Obviously, if you lock something away it’s not gonna get better behaved. I contacted another breeder for help and she said when he snaps, because he did start to snap when I moved him like if he was sat on me, so she said hold his nose, his mouth and his nose together for three seconds and then tell him no. After a couple days, that worked. He doesn’t ever go for me now. Apparently, it’s just them testing the waters because they want to be the number one in the herd kind of thing. So, that was a bit of surprise how aggy he was. Er, he poos a lot! That surprised me to be fair. Other than that, I don’t think... it actually is surprising how intelligent he is. You can get him to do tricks, recall like a dog, he will come to a whistle and to his name. He spins round too. You can teach them like you would a dog. Really intelligent.

K: is he castrated?

P: Yeah, I got the breeder to do it, I think it was like an extra £200 or something. I heard they were really aggressive if you keep their balls [laughs].

K: So, what is his space like?

P: Well, he has that outdoor space, but he does come indoors. We watch telly. He likes to be in front of the log burner, like almost in it. He will bark if people come to the door too. If he is startled, he will bark. But yeah, really friendly.

K: Do you get a lot of attention when you’re on walks?

P: So much attention. Can’t get up one street without people pulling over or taking pictures. We have like a local chat on Facebook, he is the background picture because everyone loves him here. He’s known as the beach pig.

K: How do you think [Walter] has changed your perception of pigs?

P: I’m vegetarian anyway, so I wouldn’t eat pork. A few of my friends who have been big pork eaters have actually cut down because they say ‘oh, he’s actually like a dog isn’t he!” Yeah, he is. Some of our friends don’t care and just say “oh, I'm going for a [Walter] butty”. But yeah, my perception... people say they’re dirty, but they’re really not. I’m a big animal lover anyway so I don’t think my perception has changed, it’s just I like them more probably!

K: And how does it make you feel when people make those sort of jokes?

P: I know they’re joking. Obviously, they’ve got their opinion on meat and I've got mine, I ain’t gonna change that. I’ve started dating someone recently and he went into Lidl yesterday and picked up three packs of sausages and looked at me for a reaction. I was like “fuck off!” [laughs]. So people do make jokes with me. My best friend absolutely loves bacon and pork, and she says "I'm sorry I just can’t stop eating it”

K: And how long have you been vegetarian for?

P: I was vegetarian when I was 8 years old for six years. I started doing bodybuilding, so I ate loads of chicken, then I went to Vietnam and saw some horrible things and I’ve been veggie about four years now.

K: What kinds of things did you see?

P: Just like chickens in cages and some strung up by their legs waiting to be chopped up, some being chopped up. I just thought it wasn’t nice. I’ve not eaten pork or lamb since I was 8 years old though. Yeah, can’t even stand the smell of bacon. If someone were to cook it in my house, I would probably vomit. I can’t stand the smell.

K: You said some of your friends don’t eat pork after meeting [Walter]?

P: Yeah, they think it’s very much like a dog and they wouldn’t eat a dog, so they can’t eat bacon anymore.

K: Did you have much experience with pigs before other than seeing them online?

P: No, never. No. I’d met pigs in like farm visits and stuff. I didn’t know anyone who had a pig though. I joined the Facebook page and there’s a lady on there who has a pig and I followed her journey and just wanted that.

K: Would you consider getting another pig?

P: I'm gonna say no. They are a handful, if I bring him in the house and he’s not attended, he will pull on wires and try play with them or get in the bins. I know they probably should be in pairs or in a herd kind of thing, but I think he gets loads of attention. He’s got the dog, the dog gets on with him fine. Erm, initially when he came they had a few little wars, it was a case of working out who’s boss and I think we’ve realised that’s the tiny Pomeranian! She won’t back down. I went to Bulgaria over Christmas, he went to the pig sitter and the dog went to my mum and dad. They think it’s strange and weird that I have a pig. When I brought them back, [Walter] was really happy to see her, like nuzzling her and stuff. You could tell he was really happy to see her it was really sweet.

K: Was he happy to see you?

P: Yeah, definitely

K: How would you describe your relationship with him?

P: We’ve got quite a strong bond. He sees me and does the zoomies, if I say to him like have a fight, he will start waving his head around and like play fighting. I think he sees me as his mum kind of thing, or the boss. We’re very close, as soon as I sit down, he will nuzzle me to death basically! I’m always covered in bruises from him nuzzling me, that’s their sign of affection. He’ll fall asleep on me, he’s very settled.

K: If he sees you as his mum, do you see him as your child?

P: Yeah I think they just have a really strong bond to you.

K: How have you adjusted with him now that life is kind of returning back to normal after the lockdown?

P: Now travel is coming back I don’t know, I might find that harder. A lot of people have said COVID is on it’s way out and asked if I will go back to cruise ships, well no, I can’t do that with a pig. People have said I've put my life on hold for a pig, but at the end of the day he’s like my baby. You wouldn’t just rehome your dog, I mean you get people who do, but no it’s not for me. As long as I can still travel and I've got my pig sitter, I'm fine.

K: Do you think you are putting your life on hold for him?

P: yeah, I probably would say I have put my life on hold. I have sacrificed things to have him, but he is also an asset to my life as well. If I could no longer travel and couldn’t find a pig sitter, it would be a different story because I'm a big globetrotter. I think if my travel was taken away because of the pig I would struggle.

K: in what ways is he an asset to your life?

P: Just like a dog is really, they become part of the family, they are affectionate, I don’t know it’s just like your pet dog, it’s part of your life. They’re your friends aren’t they? Sounds sad but they are. I think my house would be very lonely without the animals, I wouldn’t live here on my own, it would be too lonely, so they’re like my company as well.

K: Has he had any health problems at all?

P: No.

K: Did you have a vet established before you took him home?

P: I tried. I really struggled, actually to get a vet. He’s registered now but luckily never had to call them. A lot of places said they weren’t taking on pigs at the moment, I rang somewhere else, and they tried to give me a massive lecture on having a pig, saying they’ll grow big and that I'm irresponsible. Yeah, I had quite a lot of abuse from one just because I tried to register him. They said there’s no such thing as micro pig, I said I know that, I just want to register him. That was a farm vet, I rang a few small animal vets and they said no. So, I think the nearest one to me is about 35 minutes away. That was a problem at the start. I was meant to go on This Morning with [Walter]. I got asked, but it was like peak summer, there’s a lot of messing around with the movement, you have to log it and stuff, get an exhibition license and all sorts. It would take me like six hours to get to London and I don’t think it’s fair for him.

K: so, wen you spoke to the vets who said you were irresponsible, how did that make you feel?

P: Just annoying, they don’t know me, they don’t know the research I've done. They probably just thought I was like Paris Hilton or something going to get a little mini pig for my handbag. They probably just thought I didn’t do my research, but I have done. She was asking if I have the space and just really rude to me. I thought, you’ve not seen my property, you’re just being judgmental. I mean there are people who don’t do their research and get their kids one for Christmas, and then it’s dumped. Like a puppy at Christmas! There’s so many pigs who need rehoming to be fair, it is really sad. If I had a bigger property, I would rescue some more.

K: What does the word biosecurity mean to you?

P: Biosecurity... I guess it’s like, erm is it to do with like contamination and things like that?

K: Yeah, so like practices to minimise transmission of disease and things like that.

P: Yeah so I know when you move them and stuff it’s gotta be for 21 days and it’s got to be registered and stuff. Obviously, the food, you’re not supposed to feed them scraps because of the contamination and things like that.

K: Are you aware of the diseases that can affect pigs?

P: Foot and mouth, erm, I did speak to some vets actually at a country fair and asked whether I should him vaccinated. They said because he is on his own and he doesn’t come into contact with any other pig he should be fine. They said maybe worm him and that’s it. They didn’t think he needed anything.

K: Have you heard from DEFRA or online about African Swine Fever?

P: No. Not heard anything from them. I got my numbers and stuff and I know who to contact if he died or anything because obviously, he has to be disposed of in a certain way, but I don’t know, not heard from them at all. I know someone had posted on the pig site about it and what happens if it comes, maybe a couple months ago.

K: Do you worry about what happens when he dies?

P: Yeah, I'd be gutted. Same as if my dog died. It’s part of your family and your little best friend, aren’t they? I’d be devastated. I think a lot of people would be. He’s got a little fan club here! Kids are like “there’s Peppa Pig!”. Some are scared but a lot run over to him and cuddle him.

K: How do you describe pigs to people?

P: Intelligent, clean, friendly, really loving.

K: In what ways does [Walter] show that he is loving?  
  
P: He just wants to cuddle all the time. If I'm washing up, he’s nuzzling the backs of my legs for attention. He just wants petting. He’ll roll on his side. He flops over, a guy on the beach the other day thought he had killed him! He just dropped on the floor wanting him to tickle his belly. He always wants to be near you, sit on your knee.

K: Does he do that with your dog?

P: She won’t allow it, he would absolutely love to cuddle up to her. She’s one of those, she wants to be in the same room but she’s not too affectionate.

K: And what kind of enrichment do you have for [Walter]?

P: Erm, so he’s got like a horse ball, he’s got a tire, a sand pit, a paddling pool, a mud pot, an old protein tub and rope through it so he can swing that around, an old bit of Christmas tree stood up in there! And he goes on his walks too and that’s good enrichment for him.

K: Sounds like you’ve made a lot of his enrichment yourself?

P: Yeah, I made him like, I got a load of horse brushes and nailed them all together and made him a little scratching post. He’s got a Wendy house with straw in it. He doesn’t like it much. He loves the horse ball with food in it, you can throw it for him and he will fetch it.

K: Are there any challenges or barriers to caring for him in the way you’d ideally like to?

P: I'd like more land so he could potentially have friends. Other than that, no. Little annoying things like I can’t have a bin anymore because he will just be in it and throw it outside. So can’t have a dustbin, my bin is like just a liner on the counter. Even then he tries to jump up and get it. Yeah so, I don’t know. I was gonna get a new sofa, but I thought there’s no point!

K: Do you think pigs make good pets on the whole?

P: I’d say so, yeah. I actually think they’d be good in care homes. Because they’re so affectionate, I’d like to make [Walter] into a therapy pig really, or maybe even show him because he’s so pretty. Maybe one day.

K: And how would you get him ready to be a therapy pig?

P: So on his walking route there is a library and they have a lot of people with learning disabilities and they’ve seen me walk past a lot and ask if I can stop. So, I've done that and they enjoyed seeing him. But yeah, they were all petting him and giving him lots of attention. So, I think he’d be good in schools and hospitals. I think he would be amazing for people who are unwell. People have messaged me and said “My mum’s really unwell, could you bring him round”. Unfortunately, I have to stick to my walking route. But yeah, people have asked if he can see their ill or dying parents, but unfortunately, I have to stick to the regulations.

K: Does being a nurse make you want to do that with him?

P: I’d love to, yeah. I’d have to do a lot of research, I literally know nothing about it at the moment. I think he would be great for mental health patients.

K: Why?

P: He’s just affectionate. He likes to talk too, so people could talk to him and he will talk back. Just that, like friendship, someone to talk to and someone to cuddle.

K: Would he be different to say other therapy animals? Like a therapy dog or horse.

P: He has so much personality. Yeah, he’s a proper cool dude. So well behaved too, he won’t be running around causing havoc, so he’d be suited to that job. He loves the attention too.

K: How would you make a decision on whether you needed to call a vet for [Walter] or not?

P: Well, being a nurse I do have some medical knowledge. Once he kinda slipped and hobbled a bit, I think you just work it out for yourself. If he had gone lame and couldn’t walk I'd call the vet. If he didn’t eat either, so I heard if a pig doesn’t eat within 20 minutes there’s a problem. I could see that if [Walter] didn’t eat he would be sick. Especially being a nurse you can tell when something isn’t right, like if he was off his food and not drinking, His stools are always pretty formed and the same, he has his pig nuts and carrots, so if something was wrong there. So, if there was blood in his stool or like discharge in his eyes, anything like that.

K: So, being a nurse helps you navigate those situations?

P: yeah, I see on the pig site people put photos up and ask “should I call a vet”, I'm like, are you stupid!? Yeah, you should. I think, what’s wrong with you, your pig is half dead. I think if you've gotta ask that question you should be calling the vet.

K: And did you ask for advice on the pig group at all?

P: when he got a bit aggy yeah, other than that... I think I asked for advice for the walking routes before I got him so it was all in place when he arrived. I get his harnesses made by someone on that site, because dog ones don’t fit him. Yeah, the site is helpful to be fair. I've had people message me and ask for advice too.