

THE BOCA RATON observer

2003

2013

CELEBRATING A DECADE OF COMMUNITY

GRATITUDE
ADJUSTMENT
INSPIRING FOLKS
WHOSE LIVES WERE
CHANGED BY CHARITY

LIFE AFTER
LOSS
LOVED ONES
FIND SOLACE IN
CREATING LEGACIES

THE
GIVING
ISSUE

Peace of the Action

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR AND
SPIRITUAL LEADER **DEEPAK CHOPRA**
REVEALS WHY GIVING BACK
BENEFITS THE BODY AND SOUL

NO JACKET
REQUIRED
VIRTUAL GALAS LET
YOUR FINGERS DO
THE DONATING

HAUTE
DOGGIES
COUTURE CANINES
RAISE THE WOOF
FOR FASHION FUNDRAISERS

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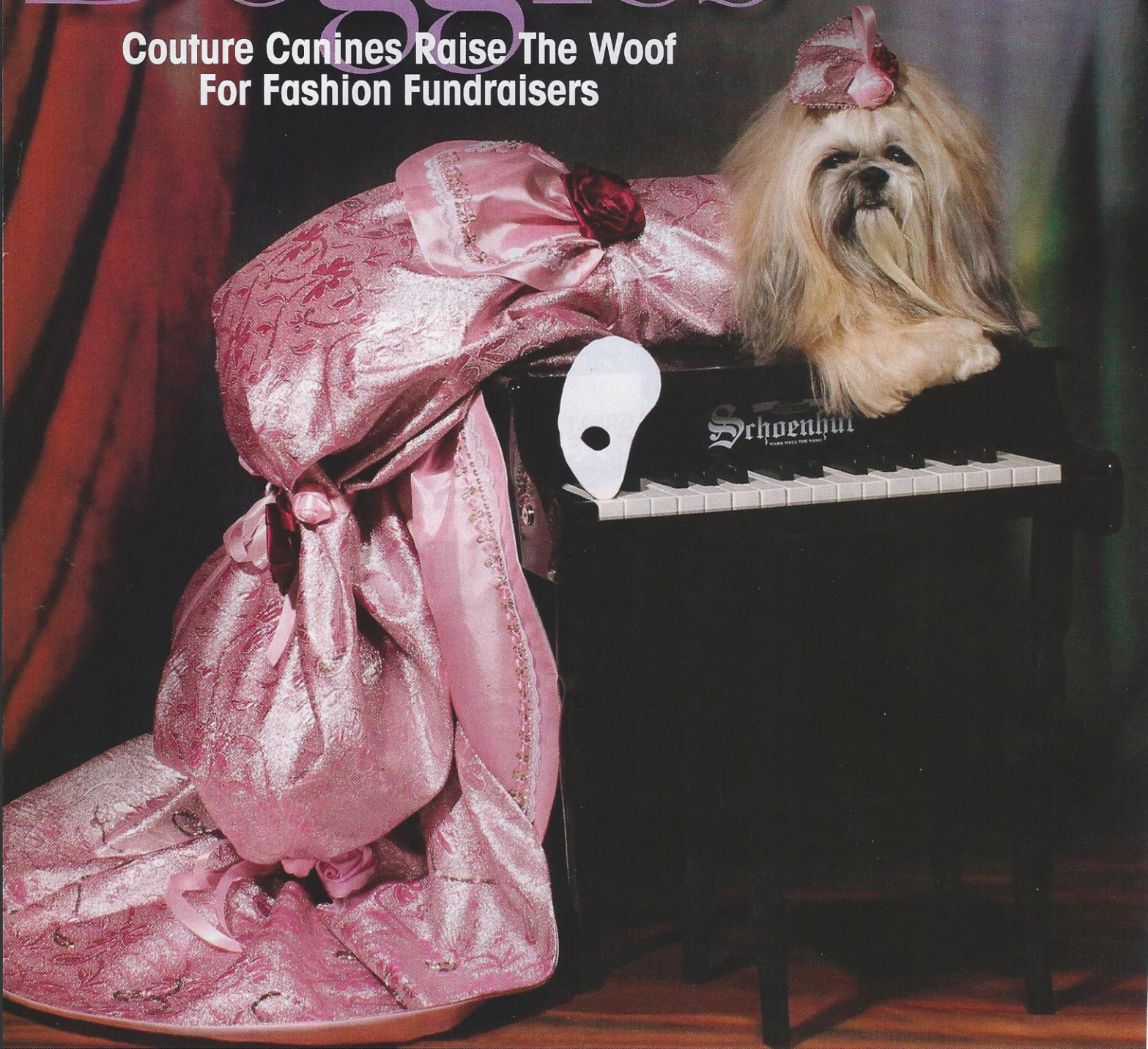


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BY LYNN ALLISON

Haute Doggies

Couture Canines Raise The Woof
For Fashion Fundraisers



THE FUR CAN REALLY FLY IN THE DOG-EAT-DOG WORLD OF FOUR-LEGGED FASHION SHOWS. PET OWNERS HAPPILY DROP HUNDREDS (AND HUNDREDS) OF DOLLARS ON CUSTOM COUTURE AND EXQUISITE ACCESSORIES FOR THEIR DOGS—AND THE OCCASIONAL FELINE—IN HOPES THAT THEY'LL STAND OUT FROM THE PACK.

"IT'S LIKE 'TODDLERS & TIARAS,'" QUIPS TINA VALANT OF EXTRAORDINARY PHOTOGRAPHY IN BOCA RATON, WHO FOR DECADES HAS BEEN ACTIVE IN THE CANINE COMMUNITY. "COMPETITIVE PET PARENTS COMPARE NOTES SO THAT NOBODY DUPLICATES COSTUMES. ONCE THEY SELECT OUTFITS FOR THEIR PETS, THEY COORDINATE THEIR OWN CLOTHES AND DECORATE THE STROLLERS OR CARRIERS IN A SIMILAR THEME."

AND THERE'S A CODE TO FOLLOW. "WE ALWAYS MAKE SURE ALL FOUR-LEGGED ATTENDEES AND CONTESTANTS FOLLOW THE RULES OF 'PET EVENT-QUETTE' TO ENSURE SAFETY," EXPLAINS VALANT, WHO ALWAYS TRAVELS WITH "POOP" BAGS AND COLLAPSIBLE WATER BOWLS. SUCH RULES INCLUDE KEEPING PETS' IMMUNIZATIONS UPDATED, MAKING SURE THEY HAVE PROPER ID AND THAT THEY'RE ON LEASHES (NOT THE RETRACTABLE KIND). "IT SHOWS THE PUBLIC HOW WELL-BEHAVED AND WELL-CARED FOR DOGS CAN BE AT PUBLIC EVENTS."

GLAM FASHION SHOWS, YAPPY HOURS AND BARK-MITZVAHS ARE ALL THE RAGE IN SOUTH FLORIDA. BUT GLITZ AND QUIRK ASIDE, THESE OVER-THE-TOP EVENTS RAISE BIG BUCKS FOR NEEDY ANIMALS.

AND THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT.

RED CARPET RESCUE

Coordinating dog shows, pet proms and upscale costume parties is a passion and second career for Laura Souza of Delray Beach, a self-proclaimed "fur mama" who named her company G Girl Productions after her beloved Shih Tzu, Gianna. Souza, who also works as a restaurant manager, organizes high-end pet parties attended by people from as far as New York and Pennsylvania, including a monthly

cue in Palm Beach and Pet Project for Pets in Wilton Manors. Her parties raise big bucks for shelters as far south as Miami. "We try to spread the monies around so we don't get married to any one charity," she says.

Souza is also co-owner of Fabulous Fur-Babies Events, and she and her partner, Laly Albalate of Doggie Bag Bakery in Miami, work day and night thinking up themes for spectacular affairs.

Last June they hosted a Fabulous Fur-Babies Cotil-

sicals Weekend.

"Contestants chose from 120 musicals including 'West Side Story' and 'The Sound of Music,'" she explains. "AF-

OPPOSITE PAGE: Laura Souza's Shih Tzu Gianna dressed as Christine from "The Phantom of the Opera" BELOW: Souza and her beloved pooch at Fabulous Fur-Babies' nautical-themed dinner cruise fundraiser

“When people question or criticize the idea that people spend big bucks for fur fashion, I respond that the spectacle brings attention to the rescue groups and that's why I got into it. It's all for a good cause.”

— Nanette DeRonda, founder, ShihNanigans, Boca Raton

“Bow-Wow Hour” at various locations.

“We call our pets ‘furbabies’, not dogs or cats,” explains Souza, who donates a portion of her event proceeds to rescue groups such as the Justin Bartlett Animal Res-

lion at the Atlantis Country Club in Lake Worth, drawing more than 135 elegantly attired pet parents and their couture-clad pets. This past September, they held a successful three-day Fabulous Fur-Babies Broadway Mu-

ter their selection, mummies and daddies, as well as the furbabies, had to dress the parts. Some daddies even orchestrated a song and dance routine! It was like watching a real Broadway show!”

Gianna, the company mascot, was dressed to the nines as Christine, the heroine from “The Phantom of the Opera.” “Her gown took months to make,” says Souza. “The train was 6 feet long and an exact replica of Christine’s.”

Mario Laliberte, a Montreal designer and founder of La Maison Vienna Couture Canine, often attends Souza's events, donating his luxurious hand-sewn creations to her fashion fundraisers.

He has many Florida clients, he says, noting that locals often order his made-to-order pet coats and harnesses made from velvet, silk, satin, Egyptian cotton and “only the finest Swarovski crystals imported from Austria that reflect the light to enhance our couture,” he says. “People spend a lot of money on their pets



because they're part of the family. They also feel that their pets are an extension of themselves and reflect who they are as an individual."

Research reflects his sentiment. A 2013 Amazon.com survey confirmed that in the nation, South Florida pet parents are most likely to spend money on couture outfits, grooming products and pet supplies. Miami nabbed the top spot, with Fort Lauderdale

She adds: "Dog fashion is here to stay."

POOH-POOHING NAYSAYERS

Tri County Animal Rescue in Boca Raton holds an Annual Doggy Ball each March, along with fashion fundraisers throughout the year. Founder and Director Suzi Goldsmith points out that it's often empty nest-

“It's like ‘Toddlers & Tiaras.’ Competitive pet parents compare notes so that nobody duplicates costumes.”

— Tina Valant, Extraordinary Photography, Boca Raton

dale placing fifth, West Palm Beach sixth, Pompano Beach 10th, Coral Springs 14th, Miramar 17th and Pembroke Pines 18th.

"It's all part of people wanting to humanize their pets," notes designer Ada Nieves, a designer who holds a pet apparel degree (who knew there was such a thing?) from New York City's Fashion Institute of Technology. For one demanding owner, Nieves created a \$14,000 illuminated dog outfit inspired by a gown worn by Katy Perry.

Not to be catty, but... \$14,000? Isn't that a bit over the top?

"Over the top, whether it's in reference to canine or human fashion, is one's own opinion," says Boca Raton resident and stylist Jo Jo Harder, author of "How to Become a Top Dog Model: America's Top Dog Model® Contest" and founder of its complementary calendar, both of which benefit animal charities. Harder has been involved with fundraising for more than a decade.

ers who lavish affection and money on their pets.

"People go all out to make sure their pet is the best-dressed," she says. "It's a labor of love and if it makes them happy and they enjoy the camaraderie of likeminded pet owners, it's all good."

Dr. Leslie Hack of Boca Veterinary Clinics donates her time and hosts fundraisers throughout the year, often incorporating social media.

"I believe that charity begins at home so I offer veterinary services to organizations like S.H.A.R.E and Chesed Rescue among others," Dr. Hack says. The Shepherd Help and Rescue Effort is a group close to her heart and she often donates time and services to the hapless animals that land at her door.

For her latest fundraiser, she invited friends and clients to post photos of their pets in athletic attire to her Facebook page and those that received the most "likes" won \$1,250 worth of veterinary services to be donated to their animal charity of choice. Winners



Harness by La Maison Vienna Couture Canine



Harness by La Maison Vienna Couture Canine



Cotillion attendee Frances the English Bulldog in Jackie O-inspired couture designed by Diane Waring; Tucker the Border Collie and therapy dog is wearing a royal ensemble by designer Nanette DeRonda

Photo by Tina Valant, Jo Jo Harder Photo by Wendy Foskey



Jo Jo Harder with Rose, the reigning America's Top Dog Model, at an SPCA Fall Gala



Michael Jackson lookalikes Trump, a mini-Schnauzer, and owner Kevin in couture by Bianca Brown

Photo by Tina Valant



Dogs and their owners get in the spirit during the Fourth Annual West Palm Beach Pup Crawl and Fabulous Fur-Baby Event



Nanette DeRonda holding Jasmine, dressed as a character from "Beauty and the Beast" and Layla, lounging on the piano dressed as Dolly from "Hello Dolly"



Photos by Kelly Greene

Participants at the Fourth Annual West Palm Beach Pup Crawl and Fabulous Fur-Baby Event, which included a fashion show and tribute to our troops

also received free services for their own pets.

"Nobody had to put their hands in their pockets to pay for this fundraiser," says Dr. Hack. "It was a win-win situation and we got a kick out of the creative photos."

Doting owners often turn to Nanette DeRonda, a Boca Raton mortgage underwriter, who also designs and sells elaborate pet frocks through her online company, Shih-Nanigans.

"I studied fashion history so I love making period pieces from the Renaissance or the Roaring Twenties," says DeRonda, who spends about 24-30 hours creating each outfit, always ensuring it's comfortable for the animals. "I get inspired by TV shows and the movies. I've made costumes inspired by Las Vegas showgirls—I never know where my next creative idea will come from."

DeRonda was the force behind Gianna's magnificent "The Phantom of the Opera" dress, which took her months to complete.

"My grandmother was a seamstress and taught me how to make my own patterns," she says. "I use the same principles to design costumes for dogs. What I love is how people gravitate to these fundraisers... The more people come out, the more money we can give to rescue groups since there's so much need in the community."

She pooh-poohs naysayers.

"When people question or criticize the idea that people spend big bucks for fur fashion, I respond that the spectacle brings attention to the rescue groups and that's why I got into it," DeRonda says. "It's all for a good cause."

Anyway, adds Harder: "Who doesn't like to show off their dog?" ○