

## It's a Dog's City

Michele Langer • Web Contributor • New York City

In the city of New York, where people churn through the revolving door of their daily routine, the love of dogs can be the great equalizer. Regardless of what they do, where they live, or who they are, the walls can be broken down between typically aloof New Yorkers once dogs become the common denominator. In any given dog run, it's not uncommon for an owner to step in and shed all their layers, asking that dance student how her pit bull mix is doing, or exchanging training tips with an investment banker who's had recent success with his Lab. The most precious commodity to a dog is love; and just as there are many different kinds of New Yorkers, their love of man's best friend comes in many shapes and sizes.



photo: Michele Langer

Passing through the streets, whether by car or on foot, it's difficult not to notice the plethora of shops, groomers, spas, and various services that specifically cater to canine clientele.

Just as it's equally apparent how much New Yorkers love dogs—not just theirs, but other owners' as well. Perhaps to the irritation of the less approving, many times a person will stop in the middle of a sidewalk to greet a dog and exchange a few words with their owner. If you spy a crowd gathering in front of a shop, you just may have come across a pet shop where puppies are displayed in the window. On many occasions, people drop in to “just look” at the puppies for sale, while admitting that their visit is a way of managing stress, even if they aren't in the position to take one home. “Dogs are better than therapy,” says Marcia Coren, a Manhattan dog owner visiting the **Pets on Lex** shop. “Since I got mine, I feel so much lighter in my head...in my heart. Who needs a shrink when you can get a dog?”

That sentiment is one The Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals hopes to reinforce, while promoting the adoption of homeless dogs in the city. Comprised of various non-profit animal concern groups, this alliance sets out to encourage adoption of shelter pets, as well as proper animal care and control. They maintain that no healthy dog (or cat) should have to be killed, because they don't have a home to go to, and their ultimate goal is to make New York a no-kill city.

In supporting their mission, they are incredibly active in sponsoring adoption drives across the city, as well as educating pet owners about the benefits of spaying or neutering their dogs. With city shelters overwhelmed by unwanted animals waiting to be put down, this last effort is fundamental to hopefully reducing that number in the future. But pet population isn't the only reason why this measure should be taken, it also has long-term benefits to the general well-being of the animal, says Anne Marie Karash, Associate Director for **The Humane Society of New York**. One of the founding members of the Mayor's Alliance, The Humane Society has many tiers of responsibility. In addition to rescue and rehabilitation efforts for displaced animals, they also provide low-cost pet healthcare and veterinary services, so that as many New Yorkers possible can enjoy the bonding experience with a pet. “We're 101 years old,” says Karash, “We haven't saved the world, but we are saving a small part of it every day by helping these animals.”

And they are not alone in this mission. Countless groups have stepped up to do their part, including **Broadway Barks**, a program founded by Bernadette Peters and Mary Tyler Moore, which also aims to provide solutions for the plight of homeless animals in New York. As a result, the group now hosts an annual event in Shubert Alley, where star power is corralled to promote the cause and place animals from local shelters into new homes.

But star power isn't the key ingredient necessary, just the simple chemistry of dog lovers mixed with their passion for healthy and happy city dogs. Various neighborhood associations have been formed as a result of this desire, the most famous being **FIDO** (Fellowship in the Interest of Dogs and their Owners), based in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. This group's mission is centered on making Prospect Park possibly the most dog-friendly place in all of New York City. And they very well could be succeeding.

In general, NYC's Parks Department maintains there are 'un-official' times in all city parks where New Yorkers may walk their dog off-leash (usually before 9 am and after 9 pm). This creates a kind of social hour for owners, while their dogs are free to run around and enjoy the park unfettered by restraints. In Prospect Park, however, FIDO has persevered in taking the dogs' enjoyment one step further. There, not only may dogs be off-leash after 5 pm in the winter, they can also enjoy the city's only man-made Dog Beach, a source of envy for many owners in other parts of the city.



photo : Jennifer Braer, Courtesy FIDO

And that's just the tip of the iceberg; in addition, this park hosts Coffee Bark, a coffee hour on the first Saturday of each month and hosts an annual Pupnic (potluck picnic) each year. If that's not enough, it is all topped off at the end of year with "Bark the Herald Angels Sing" holiday party, where cider is served and Christmas carols are sung, dogs being free to howl along. Coffee and dog treats are also served, warming the heart even more after bearing witness to the devotion FIDO returns their canine companions.

Such devotion has also been translated to celluloid, resulting in the first **International Dog Film Festival** in 2005—a touring festival where dog-centric films are screened for a highly enthusiastic audience. While attending a traditional film festival, Jessica Wilding—the festival's creator—was inspired by the audience reaction to a film called *Biscuit: The Climbing Canine*. After seeing the crowd cheer on a Jack Russell Terrier's rock-climbing pursuits, she realized the untapped possibilities and set out to appeal to the dog lovers in filmmaking. In creating such a forum, the response has been overwhelming on behalf of participants and attendees. After its introduction in Philadelphia, a stop in New York City was added and the festival is now on its way to becoming an annual event.

Still, one of the most important stories consistently needing to be heard are those of service dogs, specifically search and rescue dogs. Search and rescue dogs, with their trainers, are becoming widely recognized for their continued, tireless efforts to aid people in distress, particularly in the rescue and recovery work that took place after 9/11. This has led to the creation of **The Bear Search and Rescue Foundation** by Captain Scott Shields, named after his dog, Bear. Shields and Bear were a search and rescue (SAR) team deeply involved in the efforts at Ground Zero. After Bear passed on in 2002, Shields oversaw the creation of this foundation to educate and train other SAR teams, whether with them or without. His commitment and concern ensures that SAR teams—consisting largely of volunteers—are equipped and trained so they may conduct thorough searches, as well as enabling health-care coverage for all SAR dogs that worked on the Ground Zero and Pentagon sites following 9/11.



photo: Michele Langer

Each year, the foundation hosts a ceremony honoring Service Dog Day, which is held on the USS Intrepid and commemorates service dogs of all types, including SAR dogs, bomb-sniffing dogs, and Seeing Eye dogs for starters. Such an event, in addition to others Shields coordinates throughout the year, is a testament to the amazing ability of these dogs and trainers, who assume an enormous responsibility by performing a wide variety of essentially life-saving roles. Bear's personal legacy has continued on in the form of his son, Theodore, who now accompanies Shields in his continued work wherever he is needed, including rescue efforts in Louisiana following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

As evidenced by the people who are helped by these canine heroes, dogs can be a blessing in disguise. Which is why it makes sense to return the favor, with an event that takes place throughout the city—the Blessing of the Animals. This enormously popular tradition takes place on the first Sunday of October, where places of worship invite animals, in all forms, to be blessed as part of the celebration that is the Feast of Saint Francis. In some cases, it has resounded so well with congregants, several smaller churches have decided to increase the frequency by performing blessings on the first Sunday of each month.

This tradition first began at the St. Francis Episcopal Church, when a church-goer was not able to drop her dog off at home, before heading to church. Instead, she opted to bring the dog to church with her. It proved to be a very welcome guest, and St. Francis' church declared the blessing an annual event. Soon after, many other places of worship followed, the largest turnout now occurring at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Harlem. There, an estimated 4,000 people attend their blessing each year. Not only are there dogs in attendance, but cats, birds, llamas, and any other animal of two or four-legged variety that is legally permissible in the city. The ceremonies are open to the public, regardless of religious affiliation, and are incredibly stirring occasions for New Yorkers, as well a chance to share in a custom truly unique to this city.



photo : Jennifer Braer, Courtesy FIDO

The extent which New Yorkers go to share in the celebration of dogs have been viewed with amusement by outsiders, and perhaps regarded as a bit mad, but it is nevertheless a key portion of what makes the city so unique. Many pet owners identify with their animals and this self-expression and pride often takes place in the form of doggie fashion shows, parades, and beauty pageants. In addition to the widely known Westminster Dog Show, which is hosted each year in New York, local dog runs and parks are home to many holiday parades. These include the Easter party for dogs in John Jay Park, and the immensely popular Halloween parade in **Tompkins Square Park**, which was the first dog run to ever open in the city. So don't consider it unusual to find a pug, dressed up as Little Orphan Annie, winning the Best Costume prize.

Many of these events perform a necessary function as well, providing additional outlets for New Yorkers to interact with each other, as well as meet dogs who so desperately need homes. Animal Fair magazine sponsors several events for this purpose or to raise funds in collaboration with local shelters and animal care groups. Most recently, the magazine hosted a show at The Cellar in Macy's Herald Square, where attendees lined up in droves to view the canine models, which were up for adoption by The Humane Society in New York. "In New York City, you have to be creative, because you can't just let them out the back door," says Karash. "So we tend to structure our activities around them to make sure they're active and busy. And we humans get something out of it as well."



photo: Michele Langer

So not only are dogs the vessels in which owners express their emotions and personalities, but they are also outlets through which people discover new friendships and activities as well. **Leashes and Lovers** have come up with many answers in the form of a scavenger hunt-style pub crawl, ice cream socials, and pool parties throughout the year. This group provides more than ample opportunity for dog-lovers from all walks of life to socialize with each other, whether they're looking for a partner or just want to widen their social circle. The concept began when the founder, Michelle Kennedy, met her husband while he was walking a dog in Central Park. "I'd spoken to him before," she says, "But it was when I saw him walking that dog, that I really started talking to him on a different level."

Yet if it's time to take a break and just get out of the city, but you can't be bothered to figure out the particulars, then **Blue Sky Dogs** is up to the job. Formed by Tammy McCarley three years ago, it filled the need for harried New Yorkers looking to get out of the city with their dogs. They offer custom or pre-set itineraries, which can include visiting local, dog-friendly wineries as part of a day trip together or booking out a B&B in Block Island, giving owners and dogs plenty of time to get to know each other through beach strolls and workshops. McCarley herself testifies to the engaging spirit of dog ownership and strives to bring that conviviality to others. "When we adopted our dog, it was like the whole city became friendlier."

These are just a tiny fraction of the stories, activities, and services people have to share when it comes to dogs, and many other owners never tire of hearing them. Once you ask any owner to talk about their love of dogs, the change in their facial expression or tone of voice happens almost instantly. Within minutes, complete strangers are relating and sharing their stories, whether happy or sad, somehow finding that common basis of understanding. And for New Yorkers, in particular, one can say this city and its denizens have gone to the dogs.

## Places, Groups, and Services Mentioned:

### Blue Sky Dogs

212-531-DOGS • info@blueskydogsny.com  
www.blueskydogs.com

### Broadway Barks

212-840-0770 • www.broadwaybarks.com

### FIDO

888-604-3422 • fidobrooklyn@att.net  
www.fidobrooklyn.org

### The Humane Society of New York

212-752-4840 • www.humanesocietyny.org

### International Dog Film Festival

chmntp@aol.com • www.dogfilmfest.com

### Leashes and Lovers

718-216-4988 • www.leashesandlovers.com

### Pets On Lex

1271 Lexington Ave • 212-426-0766 •  
www.petsonlex.com

### The Bear Search and Rescue Foundation

732-713-6298 • www.bearsearchandrescue.org

### The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine

212-316-7490 • www.stjohndivine.org

### The Mayor's Alliance for NYC's Animals

212-252-2350 • info@AnimalAllianceNYC.org  
www.AnimalAllianceNYC.org

## Dog Runs

### MANHATTAN

- **Washington Square Park Dog Run** • Enter from W 4th St & Thompson St
- **Union Square Dog Run** • Enter from W 15th St and Union Square West
- **Madison Square Park** • E 24th Street at Fifth Ave
- **Tompkins Square Park** • E 9th St at Avenue B
- **Thomas Smith Park/Chelsea Waterside Park** • 11th Ave and W 24th St
- **Carl Schurz Park** • E 86th St & E End Ave

### BROOKLYN

- **Palmetto Playground** • Columbia Pl and State St (in a corner by the BQE)
- **Dimattina Park** • Hicks and Rapelye St.

### QUEENS

- **Flushing Meadow Park Adjacent Dog Run** • Between 64th Rd and 64th Ave, along the Grand Central Parkway.

### BRONX

- **Van Cortlandt Park Canine Court** • W 252nd St & Broadway, enter on the path on 252nd and follow it around 100ft to the left.

### STATEN ISLAND

- **Prince's Bay/Wolfe's Pond Park**  
End of Huger and Chester Ave

## Dog-Friendly Hotels

### Buckingham Hotel

101 W 57th St • 212-246-1500  
Includes dog-walking, sitting, and grooming services

### Holiday Inn - Martinique on Broadway

49 W 32nd St • 212-736-3800 • 800-465-4329

### Loews Regency

540 Park Ave • 212-759-4100 • 800-23.LOEW  
Includes dog-walking services

### W Hotels

888-625-5144 • www.starwoodhotels.com/whotels  
Includes dog-walking, sitting, grooming services, and on-call veterinarian

## Dog-friendly Airlines

Includes additional charge per pet, individual policies apply

### American Airlines

Reservation Line for pets 800-733-7300  
General Line 800-433-7300

### Continental Airlines

Live Animal Desk 800-575-3355  
General Line 800-525-0280

### Jet Blue

General Live – Animal/In Cabin 800-538-2583

### United Airlines

General Line - Animal/Cargo 800-241-6522

## Dog Spas/Camps

### Biscuits and Bath

212-419-2500  
www.biscuitsandbath.com

### Happy Paws Pet Resort

316 Lafayette Ave • 212-431-6898  
www.happypawsinc.com

### The Dog Run

136 9th Ave • 212-414-2500 • www.thedogrun-nyc.com

### The Pet Camp – Upstate dog camp/farm

380 Bart Bull Rd, Middletown, NY  
845-692-2922 • www.thepetcamp.com

## Dog-friendly restaurants

Outdoor/sidewalk cafes only by law

**Barking Dog Luncheonette**  
1453 York Ave • 212-861-3600

**Boat Basin Café**  
W 79th St & Riverside Park  
212-496-5542 • [www.boatbasincafe.com](http://www.boatbasincafe.com)

**Grey Dog's Café**  
33 Carmine St • 212-462-0041

**Shake Shack**  
Madison Square Park • 212-889-6600 •  
[www.shakeshacknyc.com](http://www.shakeshacknyc.com)

## Events

**American Cancer Society's Dogswalk Against Cancer**  
Riverside Park & 89th St  
[www.dogswalk.com](http://www.dogswalk.com)  
May 7, 9 am Registration, 10 am Event starts

**Leash and Lovers' East Village Pub Crawl/  
Scavenger Hunt**  
11th Street Bar • 510 E 11th St  
[www.leashesandlovers.com](http://www.leashesandlovers.com)  
May 13, 4 pm–7 pm

**FIDO Brooklyn's Pupnic picnic in the park**  
Nethermead portion of Prospect Park  
[www.fidobrooklyn.org](http://www.fidobrooklyn.org)  
June 23, 5 pm-sundown

**"Living with Art" launch party for Barkin' Arts Gallery**  
153 Lafayette St  
[www.barkinartsnyc.org](http://www.barkinartsnyc.org)  
June 14, 6 pm–8 pm

**My Dog Loves Central Park Country Fair**  
[www.centralparkpaws.org](http://www.centralparkpaws.org)

**The Bear Search and Rescue Foundation's  
Service Dog Day**  
[www.bearsearchandrescue.org](http://www.bearsearchandrescue.org)

**BARC Shelter Dog Parade**  
Williamsburg • 718-486-7489 • [www.barcshelter.org](http://www.barcshelter.org)

**Tompkins Square Park Halloween Parade**  
Tompkins Square Park Dog Run  
[www.dogster.org](http://www.dogster.org)

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**Michele Langer** is a creative jack of all trades, working in marketing by day and writing by night. She shares a New York City studio with her husband and a dog and dreams of a bigger space to live in.