

# Mon Valley Paws' annual Pet Walk next weekend

The event benefits animal assistance organizations throughout the Mon Valley.

By MAX ROBINETTE [mrobinette@yourmvi.com](mailto:mrobinette@yourmvi.com)



Mon Valley Paws shelter and rescue committee leader Heidi Martin is with her husband, Chris, and their dogs, Elroy and Lala.

Submitted

Mon Valley Paws, a nonprofit organization that benefits animals, will host a Pet Walk and Vendor Show Sept. 10 at Monessen City Park.

Building on previous success with the event, the organization has booked 40 food and craft vendors this year.

“It’s gotten bigger every year,” member Judy Burdis said. “After last year, people from all over have been talking about it.”

The event runs from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and features a pet costume contest, 50/50 raffles and gift baskets, a pet blessing and a dog training demonstration by trainer Ed DeLancey from Leading to Learn in Greensburg.

“Lots of people come just to see the dogs, even if they don’t have any themselves. It’s a great time for everyone,” founding member Randy Marino said.

Marino and organizing members started Mon Valley Paws in 2020 following their work with the Puppy Up Foundation – a national nonprofit that funds canine cancer research.

Marino became involved with Puppy Up after his dog, Capone, fell ill and ultimately died of cancer. “My dog passed away from cancer at six and a half years old,” Marino said. “But he contracted it at four and half. Going through treatments and medication I discovered what an expensive proposition vet care is today. I got involved with Puppy Up after that.”

Marino and organizational leaders praised Puppy Up, but volunteers wanted more autonomy.

“They’re a great organization,” Marino said. “But after a while we wanted to have a little more control over our mission and where the money goes. So we formed our own nonprofit.”

Over the last two years MVP has successfully raised money for multiple animal nonprofits, shelters and rescues. Marino said by the end of this year, they expect to raise nearly \$50,000 for local organizations and individuals involved in animal care. The nonprofit redistributes unused animal food, aids senior citizens struggling to pay for veterinary bills, donates emergency funds for injured animals and supplies local EMS departments with animal resuscitation kits.

One organization MVP works closely with is the nonprofit Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pet. The national organization has provided more than 400 medical service dogs to the general public, 90% of which have gone to veterans suffering from psychological or physical injuries resulting from their service. Originally based in Florida, Guardian Angels will soon establish its second campus in Washington County. Organizational representative, Purple Heart recipient and former state Sen. Jack Wagner explained how effective medical

**PET WALK • A9 FROM A3 service dogs can be.**

“These dogs are trained to recognize invisible ailments,” he said. “Brain injury, post-traumatic stress, diabetic seizures or disruptive nightmares — they’re trained to address a wide variety of issues.

“Many of the veterans who come to us are generally on some kind of medication. We’ve discovered, incredibly, that many lose the need for medication after acquiring a service dog. The goal is for a person to have a normal life, and these dogs become a primary ingredient in that goal.”

Wagner explained that medical service dogs often save lives.

“The suicide rate among veterans is twice that of the general public,” he said. “Often this high rate is related to injury or experiences veterans obtained in service of our country. Of all the dogs we’ve matched with veterans, we’ve seen zero suicides.”

Wagner acknowledged that organizations like MVP provide vital resources and facilitate good works. “It’s great to have organizations like Mon Valley Paws that care about

animals, touch on a wide variety of community involvement and bring people together for a good cause,” Wager said.

“If you treat animals well, you treat people well. Organizations like Mon Valley Paws, groups that care about animals — it says a lot about the people of the Mon Valley.”

Shelter and rescue committee leader Heidi Martin said MVP has additionally worked this year with Angel Ridge Animal Rescue, Pet Search Animal Rescue and Placement, Husky PAWS Rescue and Furkids Dog and Cat Adoption.

Martin said all four organizations will attend the Pet Walk, as well as two groups that MVP hopes to work with in 2023: Southwest Pa. Pugs With Special Needs in Donora and Chaos’s Lunatic Duck Rescue of South Western Pennsylvania.

Martin has a long history of working with animals, having operated her own pet grooming salon. She recently relocated to the Mon Valley with her husband, Chris.

“I’m happy to be part of an organization like Mon Valley Paws and happy to be able to give back. Moving to the Mon Valley, I’m really happy we’re here,” she said.

Secretary Jessica Cocciolone explained that MVP evaluates a number of organizational aspects before partnering with an organization, including organizational structure and animal treatment.

Cocciolone grew up in Monessen and now provides cyber security for U.S. Steel. She said she’s always seen a need to care for animals.

“Growing up, we rescued maybe seven stray cats. They were always around, always needed help. I’d say it probably started then,” she said. “I also own five animals. I used to foster cats, but I fostered too many.” To support animal groups, MVP has proved to be a creative and resourceful fundraiser.

In June, MVP held its first annual golf outing at Cedarbrook Golf Course, hosting 68 participants.

The event featured basket prizes, a sponsor for each hole and more than 30 individual and organizational donors, including the Penguins, Steelers, Vocelli’s Pizza, Jack Daniel’s, Trax Farms, the Knights of Columbus and Pet Supplies Plus in Belle Vernon.

Throughout August, MVP partnered with Felicia’s Restaurant and Lounge in Monessen, offering a \$14 spaghetti and meatball dinner. Individuals bought a meal ticket through the nonprofit, which split proceeds with the local restaurant. “We have eight restaurants that we work with that give us a percentage of sales during certain times,” Marino said. “You pick a day in advance and when you eat there while the fundraiser is going on, you effectively give us a percentage of the sale.”

Like many nonprofits, individual support is vital for MVP. Marino explained that many individuals stay updated and support the organization through its monthly newsletter.

“We have around 1,000 people subscribed to our newsletter,” he said. “We just got a new PR director, and we’d like to get the newsletter up to 2,000.”

In its July newsletter, members told the story of Stephanie Tetteris, a local school-aged girl who asked friends and family to donate to MVP for her birthday.

“Through this unselfish act, 78 pounds of dog food, 46 pounds of cat food, 12 pounds of Milk Bones and 6 pounds of cat treats, blankets and toys were donated to As They Come Animal Rescue in West Newton, Pa.,” the newsletter read.

Individual members also bring a lot of passion to the nonprofit.

Elmer Spiker is a retired steelworker who got involved with MVP after discovering the organization on social media.

“They saw me and thought, ‘He’s a guy with a big mouth, knows how to step on toes, knows how to get what he wants,’” he joked.

Spiker has worked with Fayette Friends of Animals for years and said there’s always a need to provide care for animals.

“The need is everywhere,” he said. “I get calls all the time at the shelter and we can’t do everything.” Spiker told stories of animal mistreatment he’s seen over the years at the shelter.

“Not long ago, someone tied two pit bulls to a gate and left them there, out in the cold, sleet and rain. If they do that to animals, how would they treat a person?” he said. “Pets don’t have a voice. You have to be a voice for them.”

Spiker’s dog Olivia is an English foxhound, though her full family tree remains a mystery.

“Her dad was a traveling salesman. We’re not sure what he was,” he said.

Judy and Dave Burdis have rescued dogs for years.

“Dave found one of our dogs, a springer spaniel, in the middle of the road in Wisconsin,” Judy said. While both acknowledge a need for more animal care, they also recognize a shift in American culture toward viewing pets as community assets.

“One time I was out in central Pennsylvania with our dog at the time, and it was a hot day,” Dave Burdis said. “I took our dog into a KFC, and they didn’t bother us at all. They just let us hang out there and cool off.

“Years ago, they would’ve kicked you out. When we were younger, dogs and cats were household pets. They weren’t part of the community like today.”

“I talked to a girl today who had a corgi,” Judy Burdis said. “She said there’s so many stores that are pet friendly now. She said she took her dog into every store now, and if they don’t say anything, there’s no issue.”

Burdis said there might be a limit to pets in public, though.

“Did you see the story about someone walking their python in Duquesne and it getting loose? How do you walk a python? I’d like to know,” she said.

Dave and Judy's dog Charlie, a field spaniel, passed away recently. While they're taking their time, they plan to adopt again.

"We'll get another dog eventually," Dave said. "When the right dog strikes us the right way."

"The right dog will come along and we'll know it's our dog," Judy said.

Marino said that anyone interested can take part in the eclectic group. "Let me sum it up this way: we're a traveling circus. And we're always looking for people," he said. For more information on the Pet Walk and MVP, follow Mon Valley Paws on Facebook or visit [monvalleypaws.wordpress.com](http://monvalleypaws.wordpress.com) .