



ANDY CHU/STAFF PHOTO

Sadie, above, dressed up as singer Pink for the Howl-loween costume contest at the Furry Friends Rescue's Tail Waggin' Dog Walk and Appreciation Picnic at Central Park in Fremont on Saturday. Lily, below, attended as the Bride of Frankenstein.

A paradise for pets at rescue event

Dog owners, dogs unite as nonprofit hosts walk-a-thon for hundreds in Fremont

By Chris De Benedetti
Correspondent

FREMONT — Tonya McGirr and Charles Varien are such big fans of Furry Friends Rescue, they drove from Nevada on Saturday for the organization's Tail Waggin' Walk & Appreciation Picnic.

In past years, McGirr and Varien served as "foster parents" for the animal rescue group, which once housed as many as 27 dogs while searching for a proper home for each animal. The couple since has moved to Fernley, Nev., from the Bay Area. But the distance didn't keep them from bringing Dante, an 8-year-old German shepherd longhair and Cinder, a 6-year-old chow-Labrador mix, two dogs they adopted from Furry Friends Rescue.

"It almost makes you cry to see all the dogs



you fostered and to see them in their new homes," McGirr said, eyeing the hundreds of pets and their owners around Central Park.

The couple was not alone in their enthusiasm for the Fremont nonprofit, which made the event seem more like a family reunion than a typical fundraiser.

Kathy Dowling, a married Fremont woman and mother of three, praised Furry Friends for asking her tough questions and ensuring that her home would be right for Carmen, a terrier mix puppy she adopted over the summer.

"They don't say yes right away; they interviewed my whole family," Dowling said. "It's like adopting a child."

Ray and Dee Brown, San Jose grandparents who adopted two dogs from the group, echoed other pet owners. "They put the animal first," Dee Brown said, while standing near her pets, Kelsey, a 12-year-old German-shorthair mix, and Kahlua, a 9-year-old springer spaniel mix. "And they're honest about the dog's history. So you'll know exactly what you're getting."

Founded in 1998, Furry Friends Rescue is an all-volunteer nonprofit dedicated to rescuing dogs and cats and finding a suitable home for them. Keeping with the group's mission,

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it was a pets' paradise Saturday at the park's southern edge.

Nearly 200 dog owners took part in a walk-a-thon around Lake Elizabeth. A picnic followed, featuring pizza, dessert and soft drinks.

Almost 20 dog-related booths encircled the area, the center of which hosted demonstrations from Alameda County Sheriff's Search and Rescue and the California Rescue Dog Association.

Then competitions were held, including a Howl-low-eeen! Dog Costume Contest, and a dog show where pets competed for categories such as, "Waggiest Tail," "Most Unique Breed Mix" and "Best

Kisser."

Hosted by Emily Verna, the nonprofit's president and one of its five original founders, the day's proceeds will go toward the nonprofit group. That was just fine with Tri-City dog owners such as Mario Vallejo, a Fremont man who adopted a dog with his wife, Jennifer.

Vallejo quickly broke a sweat on the muggy morning by joining Naya, his massive South African Boerboel farm dog, for the walk-a-thon.

"You hear so often about people not treating dogs right," said Vallejo, a network engineer at a tech company. "My wife and I grew up with dogs. So, it's nice to see an organization like this out there, and we want dog owners to support that."