At Puttin' On The Dog, Adopt-A-Dog Honors Frank Gaudio's Love of Dogs

By Elizabeth Barhydt

On Sunday, Sept. 27, Frank J. Gaudio will be honored at Roger Sherman Baldwin Park at an event where a large portion of the crowd will arrive on leashes.

That is unusually appropriate.

Gaudio, president and CEO of The First Bank of Greenwich, is this year's honoree at Adopt-A-Dog's 38th annual Puttin' On The Dog, the Greenwich festival that brings together rescue dogs, family pets and the people who organize considerable portions of their lives around them. The event runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and is Adopt-A-Dog's largest annual fundraiser, supporting rescue work, veterinary care, training, enrichment and daily operations for dogs awaiting homes.

A Festival With Purpose

There will be dog competitions and demonstrations, food trucks, vendors, children's activities, a lure course, a Bone Bar and music by DJ PRZA. Adoptable dogs will be there to meet prospective families. Friendly leashed dogs are encouraged to attend, which means the park will contain the usual Greenwich collection of families, friends and neighbors, plus a sizable population of guests who will greet one another nose first.

This year, the festival will also serve as a filming location for "The Adoptables," a comedy series created by Greenwich native Blake Sherwyn. The project parodies reality television using real shelter dogs from Adopt-A-Dog and is expected to debut online later this year.

The festival is meant to be fun. The work behind it is not frivolous.

"Puttin' On The Dog is much more than a fundraiser," Adopt-A-Dog Executive Director Chessy Santoro said. The event, she said, gives people a chance to see both the joy dogs bring and the effect a community can have on animals needing help.

Gaudio is being honored for his leadership and The First Bank of Greenwich's longstanding support of Adopt-A-Dog. The relationship makes sense on paper: a community bank supports a local nonprofit. In practice, however, it has become considerably more specific.

Dogs Come Through the Door

At The First Bank of Greenwich, dogs are not an abstract charitable cause.

They come through the door.

"I'm a big dog lover," Gaudio told the Greenwich Sentinel in 2020.

That declaration has acquired institutional consequences.

The bank's Cos Cob branch has long welcomed dogs, and employees keep treats for visiting animals. Scot Weicker, a longtime friend of Gaudio, described the arrangement in a 2023 Greenwich Sentinel profile: "Dogs are welcomed with open arms and treats by Frank and his dedicated staff."

A Bank That Thinks Differently

The First Bank Of Greenwich has never behaved much like a bank that considers its customers' lives to begin and end at the teller window. Gaudio joined the bank in 2011 and became president and CEO in 2015. Under his leadership, the Cos Cob branch has hosted art exhibitions and live music, the bank has supported local nonprofits and community events, and Gaudio himself has become recognizable around Greenwich for advertising that occasionally puts the president of a financial institution in situations not generally contemplated in banking school.

One billboard put him in a space helmet and declared The First Bank of Greenwich the "Best Bank in the Galaxy." The joke followed a conversation with John Fareri, who, after hearing that The First Bank of Greenwich had been named Best Community Bank in Greenwich, told Gaudio to "think bigger." Gaudio did.

Dogs fit comfortably into such a bank.

"I eat, breathe, and sleep customer service every day of my life," Gaudio said in a 2022 profile.

His idea of customer service has repeatedly extended beyond financial transactions. The bank's programs tend to grow out of the things its customers actually care about — art, music, local businesses, nonprofits and, increasingly, animals.

"People with pets are often very compassionate," Gaudio said in 2024. "They love their animals and feel strongly about them."

Saving for the Dog

Eventually, that observation produced something wonderfully specific: a bank account for the dog.

The First Bank of Greenwich created its Pet Savings Account so owners could put money aside for veterinary visits, food and other expenses. The idea is financially ordinary — save money now for expenses later — but the framing could only have come from a place that had spent enough time watching dogs accompany their owners through the front door.

Gaudio later explained that he saw another possibility for it.

"I recently started a pet account here at the bank for anyone who wants to put money aside for their four-legged friends," he told Venü Magazine.

He also told the magazine that the account could be used by children doing chores and saving toward having a dog of their own.

There is a practical lesson tucked inside that idea. Wanting a puppy is easy. Supporting one is more complicated. Food runs out. Vaccinations come due. Dogs swallow things nobody imagined were edible. Veterinary emergencies have an uncanny ability to occur outside regular business hours.

A child saving for a dog is also learning, perhaps without realizing it, that affection carries obligations.

From Lilly to Tigger

The bank's interest in animals has continued to expand.

> *"People with pets are often very compassionate. They love their animals and feel strongly about them. We want to work with people like that" — Frank J. Gaudio, President and CEO of The First Bank of Greenwich*

Its website now has a section devoted to pets and features animals looking for homes. The current "FBoG Furry Friend," Lilly, is a 5-year-old retriever mix being promoted through Adopt-A-Dog. She is described as sweet and gentle, initially timid and best suited to a calm home where she can build trust.

The bank has also crossed the species line.

Through Friends of Felines, it currently features Tigger, a tabby whose adoption profile describes him as playful, energetic and particularly enthusiastic about wand toys. The First Bank of Greenwich's animal partners also include Spot On Veterinary Hospital & Hotel, K9 Dog Groomers and P'Nuts Freedom Farm Animal Sanctuary.

The annual Puttin' On The Dog sponsorship has, in other words, developed into year-round attention to animal adoption.

The relationship with Adopt-A-Dog also includes the bank's Charitable Checking Program. Under the program, customers can identify a participating nonprofit they support, and their account balances are used to help calculate quarterly donations made by the bank. The contribution comes from The First Bank of Greenwich, not from the customer's account. Adopt-A-Dog had joined the program by 2020.

A Greenwich Tradition

For Adopt-A-Dog, that support reaches an organization with deep roots in Greenwich.

The nonprofit was founded in 1981 by Greenwich residents Donna Nives, Gloria Scheuer and Pam Fahnestock, who were concerned about abandoned animals in local shelters. In 2002, the organization acquired a former veterinary clinic in Armonk and established the shelter it continues to operate there.

Puttin' On The Dog followed in 1988 and has become one of Greenwich's durable fall traditions. Adopt-A-Dog says the festival now draws more than 3,000 pet lovers and describes it as the largest event of its kind between New York and Boston.

Supporting What People Care About

For Gaudio, the connection to animals also reflects a broader idea about community banking: find out what people care about, then participate in it.

"We think of ideas like this to get compassionate people to Bank with us, and we want to support their passion," he has said of the pet program.

The bank's current pet page casts an even wider net, referring to the companionship offered by "furry, feathered or scaly friends."

That wording raises certain logistical possibilities. Dogs are already regular visitors. Cats seem conceivable. A bird might be manageable. A banker confronting a customer carrying a large iguana would presumably have to improvise.

For now, dogs remain the most established First Bank of Greenwich customers who do not sign their own checks.

Back to the Park

On Sept. 27, many of them will have somewhere else to be.

Puttin' On The Dog will fill Roger Sherman Baldwin Park with animals already sleeping on somebody's sofa and animals still waiting for one. There will be puppies and seniors, Adopt-A-Dog alumni, dogs with talents and dogs whose principal talent is being a dog. The competitions celebrate personality as much as pedigree, and adoptable dogs will be there hoping that somebody in the crowd sees something familiar in an unfamiliar face.

Adult admission is $25, or $45 for two. Seniors and children ages 5 to 12 are $10. Tickets are available through Adopt-A-Dog and will also be sold at the gate.

Santoro has said the festival brings together "our dogs, our supporters, and the community that makes our work possible."

That also explains why Gaudio fits the day.

A community bank can support an animal rescue by writing a check. It can put its logo on a sponsorship banner and consider the obligation fulfilled.

The First Bank of Greenwich has done the sponsorships, but the relationship with animals has also worked its way into the smaller habits of the place: the treats kept for visiting dogs, the rescue profiles on the website, the account created for pet expenses, the partnership with Adopt-A-Dog and an old photograph in which Brenda Fareri's dog Gus stands quite naturally among the guests at a bank art opening.

Together, they explain why, when Adopt-A-Dog decided to honor someone at a festival devoted to dogs and the people who love them, Frank Gaudio was a natural choice.

On Sept. 27, Gaudio will receive the honor.

The dogs will receive what they have come to expect.

Someone, almost certainly, will have brought treats.