

'Dogs in Party Hats' Raises Money For Guiding Eyes

By Martin Wilbur

Via Vanti! Restaurant and Gelateria in Mount Kisco went to the dogs on Sunday afternoon but principal owner Carla Gambescia didn't mind one bit.

Gambescia announced the 12 winners of the inaugural Dogs in Party Hats contest she initiated last year that challenged owners from around the area, and as far away as Florida and Washington State to submit photos of their dogs in imaginative headgear.

Winners, selected by a panel of six independent judges, collected a bag of treats and toys, courtesy of Just Dogs! Gourmet on Main Street in Mount Kisco. Each winning dog will also have a gelato flavor named in its honor. So if you stop by this month and see the flavor Yum Rum Raisin in the display case you'll know it's named for O'Malley, a Kerry Blue Terrier, who, according to his owners Gayle and Michael Riahi, is always digging for buried treasure and "raisin' something yummy."

The winners have also been recognized with their picture on the restaurant's Wall



MARTIN WILBUR PHOTO

The April winner of the inaugural Dogs in Party Hats contest, Bocker the Labradoodle, at Via Vanti! in Mount Kisco on Sunday. The contest raised money for Guiding Eyes for the Blind.

of Honor and will be featured in Via Vanti's 2011 calendar.

More importantly, the \$20 fee that accompanied each of the nearly 100 entries was donated to the non-profit Guiding Eyes for the Blind in Yorktown.

"This contest is all about creativity, community and fun," Gambescia said. "We're thrilled with the enthusiasm and great entries generated by this year's event, which we see as just a beginning."

Now that the contest is over—at least until the contest for next year resumes in September—doesn't mean that Via Vanti's commitment to Guiding Eyes ends. Gambescia said that for the foreseeable future every time a customer buys a gelato they have the option of donating an extra 25 cents to the renowned guide dog school. If a customer chooses to do that, Gambescia said she will match that donation.

Like many non-profits, which aren't receiving the same level of donations from the public during the past year and a half, to have an area merchant like Gambescia step forward is a blessing, said Lisa Deutsch,

vice president of marketing and development at Guiding Eyes.

"It doesn't make a difference, \$5 right now or \$5 million, we're plugging holes all the time," Deutsch said. "You lose one donor you look for two to replace them so this is huge."

It is estimated that it costs \$45,000 to breed, raise, prepare and train a dog and its partner. It costs nothing for the students.

Some of the other flavors that will be featured throughout the year are Life of Party (Caffe Sambuca) in March, Labradoodlicious Swirl (Banana Caramel) in April and Tutti Frutti Cutie (Raspberry Mango Pineapple and Lime Sorbetto) in August. For Sharon Mohan, of Ossining, she entered her dog in the competition after she met Gambescia when she was eating dinner at the restaurant one evening.

"It's a good cause and a fun, creative thing to do," Mohan said. "I never win anything but my dog does apparently."

For information about donating to Guiding Eyes for the Blind, visit www.guidingeyes.org.