

Lifestyle A Conversation With . . .

Justin Rudd

He makes sure things are going to the dogs

By Robin Jones ■ Photograph by Eric Van Eyke

Growing up in the Alabama countryside, Justin Rudd preferred horses to dogs. Then, after moving to Long Beach, he adopted Rosie, an English bulldog, and his fate was sealed. Today, Rudd is known throughout Southern California for the Haute Dog Easter and Howl'oween parades, annual events that draw as many as 600 dogs in full costume. He's also the mastermind behind Community Action Team, a nonprofit organization that sponsors about 38 events a year, most in Long Beach's Belmont Shore neighborhood. Not all of the events are about dogs; there's a monthly beach cleanup, adult and kid spelling bees, two 5K/10K races, and charity projects, as well. In his spare time, Rudd coaches pageant contestants, teaches fitness classes on the beach, and runs a dog photography business. He sat down with us to talk about Rosie, dog "floats," and the virtues of bringing people together.

Q: How did the dog costume parades get started?

Rudd: I came up with the idea while I was watching TV coverage of the Easter parade on Fifth Avenue in New York City. I thought, *Why don't we do that here, for dogs?* We had almost 200 dogs in the first parade, so we decided to do it for Halloween, too. This was back before costumes for dogs were big. These days they devote entire aisles at Petco to dog costumes. Ours is still the world's largest Halloween dog event.

Q: What should parade attendees expect to see?

Rudd: Last year, 650 dogs registered to be in the Howl'oween parade, and there were 200 to 300 just watching with their owners along the route. We also had 70 vendors selling lots of

dog-oriented things—like food, clothes, photography, painted portraits—but also arts and crafts. There's always a pet adoption fair and games for dogs, along with a kid costume contest and a bulldog-kissing booth. We like to give people lots of things to do.

Q: What is it about dogs that gets people so excited?

Rudd: For those of us who have dogs, they're like our kids. We want to do things with them. Rosie is the real reason I started all this stuff. I wanted to take her to dinner, so I bought a wagon and brought her along. I wanted to take her to the beach, so I worked with the city to create the Dog Beach Zone (hatedogs.org/beach.html). It's so satisfying to watch people and dogs come and enjoy the events.

Q: What's the best dog costume you've ever seen?

Rudd: The funniest to me are the people who go all out and make what we call "floats"—things on wheels that the dogs ride on. Once there was a dog in a bathtub with fake "bubbles"—a full-on bathtub! Then there were the "grilled Chis" (pronounced "cheese")—a real grill on wheels, with Chihuahuas on the grill. But my all-time favorite was a *Wizard of Oz* theme: The owner was Dorothy, and the dog (a bull mastiff) was the lion. The costumes were so authentic; it looked like they went to Hollywood to get them.

Q: How did you transition into your other community events?

Rudd: Actually, my first event was the beach cleanup, then the Easter dog parade. I've

tried to create things I wish were around, things I have a desire or passion for. And every event is family-friendly. I really want it to be that way.

Q: What's the best thing about organizing these events?

Rudd: I think community events bring people together who wouldn't normally meet. I've seen a lot of people make good friends, and it's fun to see relationships form. I love seeing people connect; I'm a bit of a matchmaker, for friendships. **W**

The 2008 Haute Dogs Howl'oween Parade will take place October 26 at 2:30 P.M., with the festival beginning at 11 A.M., all at Livingston Park in Long Beach. hatedogs.org/howlween.html. For a full slate of Rudd's events, go to justinrudd.com.

