Illini Great Dane Club

The Result of One Breeder's Passion And Her Close Friends

By Margaret Ontl

One woman decided she wanted a different type of Great Dane Club. Pat Lawrence, whose kennel name was von Waldheim pursued that idea with a passion. Along with a handful of close friends they founded what is now the Illini Great Dane Club, an affiliate club of the Great Dane Club of America.

This past march they celebrated their 27th anniversary while hosting a four-specialty cluster, which also included a puppy match, sweepstakes, obedience and rally competition.



Pat Lawrence had a vision for a new Great Dane Breed Club

"I remember sitting at the kitchen table back when phones were still on the wall," said Jeff Lawrence about the night his mom hatched her idea. "Mom called six or seven of her friends sharing the idea of starting a new Great Dane club in the Chicago land area. She wanted a different kind of club. One that offered exhibitors more than just show and go. She wanted them to have fun and to learn something also. The club was met with a lot of opposition at the time. A lot of big time Dane people didn't think we needed another club in the area."

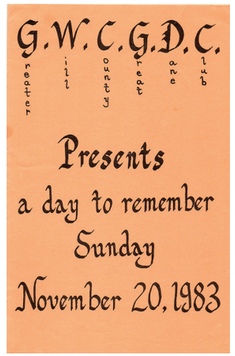
Their first meeting on February 2, 1982, was at a Greek restaurant in Shorewood, IL. Pat and her closest friends became the nine charter members. This included the following: Betty Currier, Dave Currier, Joe Ferrentino, Pat Ferrentino, Jeff Lawrence, Pat Lawrence, Barb Renkosiewicz, Lynda Renkosiewicz (Moriarty) and Suzanne Sherwood.

Barb Renkosiewicz and her daughter Lynda Moriarty both agreed it was Pat Lawrence who planted the idea among her friends.

> "Pat was a well known Great Dane breeder, who had switched from breeding German Shepherds, " said Barb.
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> "There was absolutely no money. So at one of the first meetings, the members each threw $10 into the pot," Jeff recalled.
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> "Initially, fund raising was a priority. Their first big fund raiser was a Flea Market held in the Stone City Kennel Club building. They filled it with vendors but few shoppers showed up. Even though the vendors' fees gave them a start," said Jeff.
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> "We did a lot of weird things to make money," said Lynda Moriarty. "We were all active in the Stone City Kennel Club and Pat was the president. In order to rent their building we had to roll up their mats and put away the ring gates before the event and replace them afterwards. It was a tremendous amount of work."

"I was interviewed by a local radio show prior to the flea market," said Barb. "I guess they thought a dog club was having a flea market was a unique angle."

"The club was originally called the Will County Great Dane Club, that way it didn't have a Chicago connection," said Jeff, who was just getting started as a junior handler. The club's first match was an all breed fun match (unsanctioned) on May 5, 1983 with a supported Great Dane Specialty.



Will County Great Dane Club program

"Mom also worked hard to put on a fun show, " said Jeff. "After one of their first matches, the club put on a dinner and a skit with some of the club members playing parts."

"The skit was Pat's brain child. It was a parody on the different kinds of handlers and judges that you see in the doshow ring," said Lynda. "For handlers we had the novice, the librarian, the obnoxious pay off the judge, the uber professional, the femme fatale and the poor sport. We modeled these characters after people we knew. Some of them were even in the audience. It was one of the biggest highlights of the fun part of the club. Even though many requested it be reprised it was a one and done."



Jeff Lawrence.



Pat Lawrence second from the left joined unsanctioned match judge Mike Muller in the ring with handler-breeder Phoebe Shelby. The club was transitioning between being the Will County Great Dane Club and Illini Great Dane Club.

From that first meeting in 1982 the club members did everything they could to get the get their name out there. Events included marching in the Lockport, IL Canal Days parade to promote the breed and the club; flea markets, banquets, unsanctioned matches and the baby sweeps (2 to 4 month pups). Later the club found out that was not an approved activity. The club also helped sponsor a "Pilot Dog" (hearing dog) paying for the new owner to fly to Ohio for training.

By 1988 they hosted their first AKC Sanctioned B-OB Match and Sweepstakes. In 1990 they were given approval to hold their first AKC A-OA Match in July.

> "It took us ten years for us to get show status," said Barb. Illini's first show was a rousing success. It was held February 8 and 9, 1992, with first time entries of 17 in obedience, 90 in Sweeps, 175 in the specialty.
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> "It was huge and we remain one of the few specialties that continue to offer obedience and now rally," said Lynda.
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> "After that first specialty mom sent out a questionnaire to exhibitors asking for input and ideas on how they could improve the show," said Jeff. "She tried hard to make it the best event beyond just showing."
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> "For many years we gave out $1500 in prize money, " said Barb, who held a sewing bee to make the red money-bags that held sought after coins, the larger the prize, the bigger the bag. Best of Breed was $500 dispensed in Susan B. Anthony dollar coins.
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> "It was a ton of fun," said Lynda. Times and budgets changed so they had end the prize money. "Today we try to do unique trophies."

Education, as Pat wanted, was an integral part of the club for most of its 27 years.

> "We did a lot of education at our meetings," said Lynda. "This included veterinarians, the local AKC rep and on one occasion mom and I brought all our old hip films in and displayed them in order of their grades. We discussed the differences with the members." For many years Illini maintained an active library for members, which included pamphlets, books and educational videos on any subject related to dogs and specifically with Great Danes.
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> "With the coming of the internet the need for the library waned," said Barb, who still has the books and videos.

Over the years members have participated in the Bark in the Park at a White Sox Park, Meet the Breed events including at the International Kennel Club Show and the Illini Tail Gate Party, held annually after Dane judging at the Wheaton Kennel Club Show. Margie Arnold was the organizer and it is now the Margie Arnold Memorial Tail Gate Party.

> "We also offer the Spirit of Illini Award," said Barb. "We don't give it every year. It is given to a club member who has had ten years of outstanding service and met other criteria. We offer a Danny Quest statue as the award."

Until recently, they held an annual AKC Sanctioned B-OB Match and Sweeps in July.

Pat and the club also started a fund-raiser to give back to the dog community. It was the Illini Great Dane Scholarship Fund. Each year the club donated to a specific veterinary student at the University of Illinois.

After Pat she passed away it became the Patricia Lawrence Memorial Scholarship Fund. As of 2017 the club has donated more than $33,000 to students.

Part of the fun is the "Taste of Illini" Pot Luck Luncheon on Saturday. It is free to exhibitors, members and judges. During the luncheon, they pass a basket for free-will offerings, which go towards



Education has been a priority since the founding of the club



The “Taste of Illini” luncheon guests are surrounded by past winners of the show



Unique to Illini are the photos of every Best of Breed winner since their first show.jpg



Recently the club added photos of the HIT to the gallery

the scholarship fund. Table tents list the students they have helped and where they are now practicing.

Not much has deterred members over the years from putting on the shows. From minus 26 degree temps one year, fuses blowing and the year the 50/50 raffle money was stolen the show went on. Charlie Most personally filled in the lost 50/50 money. “Even if members can not attending the meetings everybody works dog show weekend,” said Barb.

The show was first held at the Joliet Armory from 1992 to 2001. Due to the events of 9/11 it was moved to a near-by Joliet Park District Building until 2005 when it moved to the Hallmark Sports Center in Frankfort, IL, where it has been ever since. It is held in late March.

In 2005 they added a second specialty and in 2017 when AKC changed the rules they began offering four specialty shows, two each day.

When you arrive, some things stand out and reflect the history and pride the members have in their club. Lining the walls of the lunch area are posters of every Illini Best of Breed winner going back to 1992, the first show. Added recently are HIT photos for obedience competitors. They also have the Illini Top Twenty Club: where posters of every Illini member’s dog who earned Top Twenty Status is displayed. Phil and Linda Clesi joined Illini 22 years ago. Over that time they have filled a number of positions. At the present time Linda is the awards chairperson and Phil is the currently the vice-president. They joined the club after attending meetings, because they wanted to learn more about the breed of dog they had chosen.



Phil and Linda Clesi were co-show chairpersons this year. Behind them is Blake, their third Dane to qualify for the Top Twenty

“We were hooked. It just drew us in,” said Linda of the show world.

“You got to know a lot of people and we learned a lot from them,” said Phil. In 2018 Phil and Linda shared show chairperson responsibilities. They have had three dogs represented in the Top 20 Club.

Presently, Illini Great Dane Club offers a huge two-day raffle during their show weekend. Roxanne Jakubiak has been the raffle chairperson off and on for 15 years.

“When I first started we relied mostly on member donations,” said Roxanne. “Then we started reaching out to companies and we now have 40 to 50 outside donors. I hear our raffle is one of the best. Over the years I have learned what works and what doesn’t. It isn’t always about the dog. People want things for themselves.”

Some of the hot items this year included a two different wine tasting parties and a variety of Bloody Mary Mixes.

“It never hurts to ask for a donation,” said Roxanne, who has asked for donations practically everywhere including her grocery store. “I no longer have Danes but I stay in the club because it is still fun. You get to meet a whole bunch of different people.”

Mary Lee Williams a long time Great Dane Breeder travels nine hours from northern Minnesota for the Illini Shows.

“I have been coming for 25 years, “ said Mary Lee. “They are



The club tries to find unique trophies each year



Arnie Eckenrode has been a Danny Quest vendor at Illini since the beginning.



Carol Ann Wilber and Edie Proios took on the task of selling hats, jackets, T-shirts and sweatshirts for the club



Mike Arnold is a long time Illini member



Club member Katie



Roxanne Jakubiak, a member of the Illini Board of Directors, has been the raffle chair person for a number of years



Lori Marthe, Animal Accents, comes from Minnesota

hospitable, friendly and they have a lot of working members. They put on a great show. Even though I have only won here once it is still worth coming.”

“It is a great way to start the show year,” said Fay Rogstad, from Black River Falls, Wisconsin. “They make it special for everyone and of course it is always majors.”

Vendors feel the same way, with some traveling over 7 hours to attend.

“I have been coming since the beginning,” said Arnie Eckenrode. “For the most part I am here every year because the people are fun and friendly. They go out of their way to make you fell welcome. I just enjoy this show.”

It is clear that Pat Lawrence’s goals were met.

“She was really proud of the fun and learning opportunities Illini offered exhibitors beyond just showing,” said Jeff. “Everybody worked together to make it happen.”

“The show has become a well oiled machine. We work at it all year,” said Lynda. “The club will be around for a long time.”

The club’s mission statement remains true today.
The Illini Great Dane Club was chartered in the State of Illinois on February 28, 1982. The club is licensed by the American Kennel Club and is also an affiliate club to the Great Dane Club of America.

Since its conception, Illini has encouraged its members to promote the quality of the purebred Great Dane by accepting the standard of the breed as approved by the American Kennel Club and the Great Dane Club of America.

Illini continues to be a Non-Profit club dedicated to protecting and advancing the interest of the Great Dane breed, and also to encourage good sportsmanship competition at dog shows and obedience trials.



Working the show



Following a tradition, Illini members gather for their annual photo in 2016, celebration their 25 anniversary