

## Flat-Face Believers

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor  
February 2020

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### This local meetup club loves its pugs



On the third Saturday of every month, a group of fun-loving dog devotees and their charges gather to socialize and celebrate the joy of pugs as members of their families.

For the past year, the Miami Pug Meetup is welcomed at Fit & Go Pets, a Wynwood boarding, grooming, and day-care facility at 711 NW 24th St. Mother-daughter team Mayrena Arias and Aimee Alvarez opened their business in 2017. During the December meetup, one of their outdoor play yards was abuzz with 15 energetic pugs and their owners. The club had previously met at Waggle Bros. in North Miami and at Miami's Margaret Pace Park.

Long-time club coordinator is Vanessa Alpizar, owner of a seven-and-a-half-year-old therapy pug named Pugsley. They visit the Palace Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Kendall and the Coconut Grove Library, where kids happily read to the friendly pug ambassador. Alpizar is described by other members as the thoughtful and helpful heart-and-soul of the group. Her frequent social media posts of pugs in festive garb are charming and quirky enough to make one an instant pug fan.

The *BT* asked Alpizar and other club members why pug owners dress their dogs in clothes. "Why not?" she laughs. "Pugs are already funny looking." John and Vanessa O'Mara of Doral dress up three-and-a-half-year-old Jax "because he lets us and doesn't seem to mind."

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Tony Martinez, a Coral Gables attorney and Christ Journey Church deacon, explains a deeper need. “We’re proud of these dogs; they deserve the best.” Speaking about five-year-old Bodie, he says, “I’ve learned more about unconditional love from my pug. This breed makes you the center of its universe. I can feel God’s love from above through Bodie’s love.”

Other members were equally eloquent and sometimes hilarious. Gary Stevenson, who attended with his wife, Susan, and their pugs, ten-year-old Coco Chanel and five-year-old Igor Stravinsky, answered a question with a smile: “Why a pug? A pug is in a perpetual existential crisis. It lives a life between comedy and tragedy. It’s a Velcro dog, so expect it to live on your lap, on top of your face at night, attached to you 24/7.”

Coco used to enjoy watching TV’s “Dancing with the Stars” before she went blind from an autoimmune condition. She also has back and digestive issues. He adds, “My wife and I are servants to the dog, as were the emperors in ancient China.”

According to the American Kennel Club (AKC), the pug is one of the oldest breeds of dogs, originating before 400 BC in China, where emperors favored flat-faced toy breeds like the pug. In Holland, after a barking pug warned the crown prince of a Spanish army attack, it became the official mascot of the royal House of Orange, and later in England, when William and Mary of Orange ruled there.

The breed was recognized by AKC in 1885. Breed standards include even-tempered, playful, outgoing, and loving personalities. Today it ranks 28th of 193 breeds in popularity.

Don’t tell that to adoring pug owners who consider the breed as No. 1. Patricia Leary of Miami Beach says she’s obsessed with pugs. She’s never owned any other dogs except her two female pugs: 11-month-old Frankie and 10-year-old Paisley. “They’re perfect family dogs and great for the elderly. They love to snuggle and give so much love.”

Steven and Elizabeth Samper of Pembroke Pines have a one-year-old pug named Penny. They consider pugs loyal, happy, and non-aggressive. Karen Ellzey of Kendall says, “I’ve had other breeds, but I always wanted a pug and now I won’t go back,” even though her ten-year-old

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Owen has arthritis and a partially collapsed trachea that causes him to cough when he's excited.

Five of the 15 club pugs have health issues. Leary's puppy is already diagnosed with a luxating patella -- a common genetic breed flaw. The AKC recommends hip, eye, and patella evaluations, as well as encephalitis DNA tests for pugs, and warns that the breed is prone to obesity. New club member Akira Adderly sought diet advice from Alpizar for her overweight one-and-a-half-year-old male Apollo, who also snores. But Adderly finds his snoring more soothing than a sound machine.

Half of the club pugs sleep in bed with their owners. Most came from professional breeders -- nine from breeders, two from pet stores, three from rescues and shelters, and one was found on Craig's List.

The club's December Pug of the Month is one-year-old Samson owned by Laurie Brickman of Miami, who says his happy, human-like personality "makes me feel a different kind of joy. He's silly and clown-like. Always entertaining. Pugs are going to rule the world someday."

In this small corner of the planet, I think they already do.

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