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Niskayuna NEIGHBORS

Alice Berke-
PAWS
IN
PARADISE





Alice Berke— PAWS IN PARADISE

BY JENNA CAPUTO
PHOTOS BY MIA ERTAS PHOTOGRAPHY

Alice Berke is great at taking care of things—especially dogs and cats. Born in New City, NY, Alice’s family moved to Niskayuna when her father received a promotion to Director of Administrative Adjudication for the NYS Department of Motor Vehicles, based in Albany. Growing up, Alice loved writing poetry, drawing people and her original fashion designs, collecting stamps, ice skating, and babysitting. She always enjoyed art class and wanted to go into fashion design. Her art teacher suggested she leave high school a year early to study fashion design at Cazenovia College, which was an all-girls school at the time.

Alice started her college education at only 16 years old, coming back to graduate high school with her classmates before finishing her associate degree the following year. She worked a couple of summers with her aunt in the garment industry of NYC and then participated in a summer program at Parson’s School of Design and Illustration. It was her classes here that proved to her that she was only interested in designing clothing, not creating them, so she changed her major to fashion merchandising instead of design. The new track required a basic law class, sparking a new interest. She transferred into SUNY Albany where she majored in English with an Interdisciplinary

It's another day in paradise



Minor in Legal Studies. She attended school full time through the summer and graduated with her bachelor's degree at only 19 years old, jumping right into law school at St. John's University the next month. Specializing in Criminal Law, Alice finished school early once again and became the youngest graduate in her class at only 22 years old. "Going through school quickly was fine. My classmates didn't understand why I would choose to give up my senior year of high school," she says. "But I had the best of both worlds—my high school friends and a college social life. Also, I was able to start my career a couple of years earlier than my classmates, earning money,

instead of spending it to attend school."

She worked for one year as an Investigative Attorney in the NYC Department of Investigation before establishing her own general law firm in Albany, beginning with an emphasis on criminal defense and ending with an emphasis on real estate. While visiting a client a year after setting up shop, she fell down a broken staircase, severely injuring her spine. The pain grew to excruciating levels over time and she lost her ability to walk. Eventually, the Chief of Neurosurgery at the Lahey Clinic performed a discectomy and a laminectomy that finally provided relief.

—continued

*“Happiness is in wanting what you have,
not in having what you want.”*



continued

She spent over 20 years in private practice teaching classes for other attorneys as well as college students while also managing her own caseload. She served as Vice President and Board member for the Capital District Association of Rental Property Owners, contributing a monthly column to their newsletter. She also invested in residential and commercial real estate. Eventually, she sold her office building and retired from law, joining Cronin Real Estate as an Associate Broker and has been with that office ever since.

Alice began volunteering with the Capital District Humane Association (CDHA), working at adoption clinics held at the Latham PetSmart and at other events as well as reviewing applications and helping with the adoption and fostering process. They asked her to foster Mimi, an elderly dog who was deaf, blind, and missing an eye. Mimi had been found as a stray and was in a feral state. “I could not bring myself to drag her to weekly adoption clinics where she would be overlooked time and time again, so I adopted her,” says Alice. “We were overwhelmed with awe that Mimi learned to trust us and transitioned into a sweet and loving pet. After two years with us, Mimi died knowing she was loved. It was then that I decided to do what I could to help elderly and disabled pets abandoned by dementia or death of their owners, or human cruelty, to die happy and loved.”

With Adam, her partner of 14 years, Alice bought an 11-acre property in Halfmoon to provide a buffer around their house for the neighbors. They installed a handicapped ramp with side panels to

A field of pink and purple tulips is shown in the background of the advertisement.

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protect the blind dogs leaving the house to go into a fenced-in area. Paws In Paradise, Inc. had begun. An at-home sanctuary for elderly dogs and cats, usually with some kind of impairment, Paws In Paradise provides a permanent home for these otherwise unadoptable pets. The sanctuary provides temporary and permanent housing for some elderly and/or AIDs positive cats. On the canine side, they are currently only taking small dogs because their 13-year-old alpha dog, Golda, does not do well with dogs her size, but she's the perfect keeper for their smaller-sized pack. "When the dogs come inside from being out in the yard with Adam or me, Golda enters the house first," says Alice. "She then stays by the door to make sure all of 'the littles' come in and does not leave her spot until they are all accounted for."

The venture comes with a lot of expenses since many of the pets require medicine and extensive veterinary care on top of specialty equipment, food, diapers, cleaning supplies, and the like. They have since registered as a non-profit so they can accept donations to help care for the animals. Alice has refocused her writing skills to expository and persuasive writing while working on grant applications

and making connections with other businesses to develop new relationships and resources for their sanctuary. While it is difficult to lose the animals when their time comes, the work has been rewarding in so many ways. Each animal is part of their home and family, and Alice and Adam are thrilled to provide them with a happy environment filled with love and security for their final days. They even like to crank up the music and dance around the house with the dogs!

Over the years, Alice has won several awards, including: Cazenovia College Distinguished Alumni Award; Capital District Council on Business Development Entrepreneurial Spirit Award; Business and Professional Women Young Careerist Award, first runner-up; Capital District Business Review 40 Under 40 Award. She was also the first runner up in a national haiku contest, where Michael Stipes from the band, REM, was a judge. The three-line poem was titled "Joy of Your Laughter," written about her infant son's first laugh. While she didn't get to meet Michael Stipes in person for that event, she did get to sit next to Rodney Dangerfield at the Heisman Trophy Awards Dinner many years prior.

Her family are all involved with caring for the pets. Adam, a Desktop Support Specialist for Unisys works at Regeneration and serves as Vice President of Paws In Paradise on top of being heavily involved with the day-to-day care. Her son, Benjamin (24), is the Secretary/Treasurer and is a Licensed Real Estate Salesperson at Cronin Real Estate NY. Her daughter, Nakayla (19), recently won an award at her Guilderland High School graduation for her volunteer work with the CDHA. In the past, Alice was an Albany County foster parent as well, but she's focusing on her furry friends these days. She welcomes anyone interested in fostering dogs to get in touch with her for more information. She's not a big traveler but does enjoy going on cruises and dreams of taking a European cruise someday. When not on the water, their family loves to go out to eat at our region's restaurants and to visit the local Comedy Club.

Alice urges everyone to get involved in volunteering in any way possible. Nonprofits always need the community's help, and every little bit makes a difference. In the meantime, Alice will be working to make sure every homeless pet has a forever home.



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