



FEATURE

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The Local Dog Breeder, Reinterpreted by Alison Smith, Guest Editor

We have an image problem. The purebred dog and its breeders are in trouble. Animal rights activists, in their purported efforts to reduce the numbers of dogs in shelters, are pointing an accusatory finger at all purebred dog breeders. They make no distinction between mass producers, backyard operations and hobby breeders. They are waging a war for the hearts and minds of the public and gaining ground each year.

Dog related activism has generally been focused on puppy mills and laboratories, but recently a campaign has been launched that puts even the small, ethical show dog breeder in its sights. A group of activists stormed the annual Westminster show in New York City last year carrying signs bearing the same message found on their newly erected billboards: "Breeders Kill Shelter Dogs' Chances." Legislation that would restrict or eliminate the ability of even the smallest breeder to continue breeding is becoming increasingly successful. An aggressive strategy of propaganda geared toward convincing the public that all breeders of purebred dogs are unethical is proving quite effective.

It seems to me that in spite of all the energy, time, money and commitment the majority of us hobby breeders put into doing this breeding thing the right way, the public's perception of us continues to erode. We are increasingly being painted with the same brush as puppy mills and the likes of Michael Vick. We are alternately puppy factories and dog show snobs. I had already seen T-shirts sporting hateful phrases like "Mean People Breed Dogs" and "Screw Dog Breeders," but when I stumbled across an "Adopt a Dog, Euthanize a Breeder" bumper sticker, I knew it was time to act. Enough is enough...

Are We to Blame?

Nobody would debate the merits of keeping dogs out of shelters and puppy mills. And I'm sure we'd all acknowledge that issues of health and declining genetic diversity urgently need solutions. However, I would argue that we are *not the bad guys* here.

According to recent studies,¹ it seems that the primary reason dogs end up in shelters is actually due to owner relinquishment. Purebreds make up about 20 to 30 percent of shelter inhabitants (accurate numbers are elusive, given the vagaries of breed identification). Many relinquished dogs are under a year old, and pets that were paid for are less likely to be represented. What if more owners had an engaged breeder to call for help guiding them through the rough spots or, if it came to that, to offer to take the dog back? Given how high the percentage of owner relinquishments is, it seems clear that effective owner selection, education and support would be a substantial piece of the solution. We experienced, knowledgeable breeders are in the ideal position to breed dogs that are well-suited to their work as pets and to inform and support the public. Our doing so may well help to reduce the flow on the spigot that fills shelters. The answer lies not in doing less of what we do, but in doing it even better. Look at it as preventative rescue.



The propaganda has worked its magic on us as well as the public. We have internalized the notion that reputable breeders *do not* breed pets and our message to the public often reflects that. Our blame lies only in having allowed unscrupulous breeders to dominate the pet market. Imagining we are doing the right thing, we have actually stepped away from being part of the solution. How did we get here?

The “P” Word

Ethical breeders work hard to distinguish themselves from puppy mills. In an effort to separate ourselves from the exploitative, irresponsible practices of mass pet producers, we are loathe to identify ourselves with the breeding of pets. There is no greater insult in the world of dog fanciers than to be called a pet breeder—as in “Mary just breeds pets” or “Fido is just a pet.” Breeders dread being tainted with the monicker of puppy mill. We are actually so conflicted about our roles as pet breeders, that the mark of a “good breeder” has, paradoxically, become minimal breeding. We actually one up each other with the number of litters we *don’t* breed!

As hobby breeders we are well-versed at staying under the radar lest we be accused of “puppy milling.” I’m here to say that the more thoroughly we inhabit this “I’m not a breeder, really I’m not” ethos, the more puppies will be born and raised in unscrupulous hands. Potential puppy owners, if they choose not to adopt, will be forced to buy from the only source available to them—brokers. We do not yet have a model for how to market ourselves as pet breeders while staying aligned with our ethics, but we must develop one. We certainly will not ever produce the numbers that broker-connected breeders do, but it’s my belief that as a network we will have our own strength in numbers. Maybe one day we’ll tip the balance.

Local Dog Breeder Network

Eager to understand more about how we hobby breeders can increase our visibility, I hit the internet. I began by imagining I was a prospective puppy buyer and googled all the obvious search terms. I was instantly inundated with a barrage of “puppy for sale” sites. It was obvious to me, but not necessarily to a lay person, that the majority of these sites were brokering puppies that had been mass produced all over the country. It was clear that some serious money and marketing expertise had been put into positioning these sites as the easy choice for the caring prospective

puppy owner. Many sites pose as knowledgeable, ethical breeders “right in your backyard.” Although it’s easy to list Codes of Ethics, anti-puppy mill rhetoric, and generally talk the talk, there is one thing they can’t do that we excel at—being, quite literally, right in the client’s backyard. Within driving distance. Neighbors. Local.

Herein lies our collective strength. We really *are* visitable, willing to lend a hand, and answer calls with crate training questions. We are eager recipients of cute photos and stories (who else cares like grandparents!). We can provide *real* family raised puppies, sold *directly* to their new owners (no middle men need apply). Because clients can visit, they can make their own decisions about what kind of early environment will provide the best preparation for a life in theirs. Small, local breeders are also able to offer a lifetime safety net to all their pups. Public education can emphasize these points as must-haves in any considered puppy search. This doesn’t mean we never sell puppies out of our own area, just that people local to us can find us. And want to.

Given the recent awakening of the public to the value and pleasures of all things locally grown, it seems a perfect time for us to fully inhabit our roles as the local experts—the ideal place for puppies to be born and raised. No reason we can’t be “local hero” dog breeders: small, sustainable, ethical and accessible. And preferred.

Principled Professionals

In order to take back the pet market from puppy mills, we must embrace our roles as expert producers of ideal pets. We use the term *hobby breeder* to differentiate ourselves from commercial breeders. We must re-imagine ourselves not as hobbyists but as professionals; showing dogs our hobby and breeding pets our professional work. I don’t believe, for a minute, that we need to give up our day jobs and start pumping out puppies, but I do think, as a national network of local breeders, we can have a real positive effect by embracing the *pet* side of our work. We must not be reticent about positioning ourselves as the only good choice for people who choose not to adopt.

There is an important place in our increasingly pet-centric culture for the thoughtfully bred purebred dog. Dogs are not all interchangeable. One of the many reasons that pets are relinquished to shelters is that the dog, cute and cuddly as a puppy, has developed into an animal that does not meet the expectations or lifestyle of its owners any longer. It may have grown too big or hairy or active. Maybe it needs more training or exercise than anticipated. While a healthy, balanced dog that is a good fit with its owners can certainly be either pure or mixed breed, the ability of owners to make choices about size, coat length, temperament and exercise needs can improve the chances that the dog they raise is the dog they keep.

Historically hesitant to market ourselves as professionals in the area of pet breeding, we fear being seen as “in it just for the money.” Stepping away from this responsibility is not a principled answer. This is a stretch for most of us, allergic as we are to the idea of breeding pets in any deliberate way. We cringe at the very suggestion that we focus our breeding programs on the pet market, but we must.

We owe it to dogs. They deserve to be born and raised in capable, humane hands.

Being a professional does not mean we lose our ethics nor that we ditch our day jobs and start pumping out puppies full time. We are understandably leery of anything that smacks of commercialism, but when we undersell ourselves we leave the market wide open to the unscrupulous and uninformed. I'm certainly not of the mind that breeders should breed more than is comfortable for them or beneficial to their dogs, nor that puppies be mass produced, only that committed, caring breeders *should* be the ones supplying pets to the general public.

Voluntary Accreditation

Our roles as ethical, knowledgeable pet breeders can be enhanced by establishing a voluntary credentialing system. A measurable understanding of canine husbandry, genetics, behavior, training, and health issues would help validate our expertise and credibility.

An award system such as the present Hall of Fame Kennel/Breeder designation could be offered with points and levels along the way. Points might be earned through demonstrable evaluations of temperament and health of breeding stock and offspring. Earning Canine Good Citizenship and Therapy Dog titles, breed-specific health clearances, sharing health data, gaining and maintaining (through continuing education) certification as a knowledgeable, experienced breeder might all be valuable as methods of reaching recognition as an Award Winning Companion Dog breeder. The requirements for this coveted certification could be structured in such a way as to make brokering and mass production mutually exclusive with inclusion. Accountability to a code of ethics and standards that benefit today's pet dog and its owners would further differentiate responsible breeders from those less reputable.

At the moment, the most prestigious accolades and professional feedback in the dog world come in the form of conformation wins. We don't yet have a structure in place to recognize and reward exemplary work in the breeding of pets, nor really even a definition of what that would be. If breeders received commendations equal to those reserved for a Westminster win (I know that's a stretch, but you get my drift...) in recognition of their work breeding companions, equal fervor and pride would be applied to that task.

Public Education

The general public could be made aware of the value of working with a qualified local breeder through marketing, media and exhibition events. Networks of local, certified breeders would meet the needs of potential puppy owners allowing them to see where and how their pups are raised and enabling relationship building between breeder and owner. This would both increase opportunity for client support and reduce the incidence of relinquishments to shelters.

Learning how to present ourselves as trained, knowledgeable sources for all things puppy will increase the likelihood that potential owners will choose to work with us.

Our kennels, web sites and manner must be as accessible, professional and respectful as possible. Stories abound of puppy buyers who were turned off buying from a good breeder due to that breeder's attitude, lack of organization, sanitation and excessively restrictive or complicated contractual arrangements.

Helping a discouraged friend recently in her search for a dog, I was dismayed by how difficult it was to track down responsible breeders on the internet. Club web sites are often not optimized to appear first in Web searches and once they are found the befuddled potential pet owner must wade through club business and show schedules in order to find a frequently un-clickable membership list. Breed clubs might allocate a part of their rescue budget to increasing public visibility (search engine optimization, ads, handouts, etc). Posting club information in all the places we've always avoided (newspapers, supermarkets, Craig's list, etc.) would make finding us so much easier for Jane and John Q. Public.

Breeders' websites frequently are devoted to the display of show dog triumphs and pious, confusing assertions that they are "not interested in breeding pets." Easier to find and navigate were the websites of legions of less reputable breeders. My friend threw up her hands in frustration exclaiming "Forget it! It's easier to go to a pet store!" When we alienate puppy buyers, we leave them no option but to pursue their quest for a puppy elsewhere. We miss the opportunity to prevent one more shelter admission.

Hobby breeders are a highly motivated bunch. They willingly get up at 3:30 a.m. to drive five hours to a dog show, spend nights up bottle feeding orphan puppies, commit huge sums of money to show entries, RVs, supplements, veterinarians and trainers. All in the pursuit of championship points and the respect and satisfaction that comes from a job well done. If we can harness just some of the ribbon chasing determination of thousands of highly motivated, educated, ethical breeders and redirect it towards chasing accolades for accomplishments that would benefit the pet market, we would have an inextinguishable force that redefines pet breeding and helps keep dogs out of shelters at the same time.

Reference

1. National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy (Shelter Statistics Survey) www.petpopulation.org

