

How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?

If it's a puppy mill dog, the cost is far too high

► By Julie Richard

The SUV rolling down Route 340 through Pennsylvania's Dutch country contained a prototypical modern American family: 30-something upwardly mobile working parents with two children – a boy and a girl. The family had a dog but he was left in grandma's care while they escaped from their frenetic lives of work and school for a long weekend – back to a place and time when life was simpler and slower, when family values weren't merely discussed but really lived.

On the outskirts of the small town of Intercourse, the mother called to her children excitedly, "Oh, look! There's an Amish man!" The children craned to get a peek at the covered buggy and strangely clothed man driving it just ahead. Wasn't his black hat cute? And look at his beard! The car slowed. Dad didn't want to scare the horse, so the kids got a long look while mom explained how the Amish lived: no cars, electricity, washing machines, microwaves, computers, TVs, or anything else with a plug. They didn't even use zippers on their clothes. The kids were aghast. No TV? No microwave fries? No way!

The SUV slowly passed the horse and buggy. It was gone from view when the rider turned the horse onto a long private road leading to a farmhouse nestled amidst swaying cornfields. It was indeed a pastoral sight.

If only it didn't contain such a dirty, ugly secret right there, just behind the house, in a large barn hidden from view.

Welcome to Lancaster County, home to one of America's largest and oldest Amish populations. Boundless green hills are dotted with placidly grazing cows and sheep; healthy crops wave in gentle breezes. According to *FamilyFun* magazine, it's the second best family vacation destination in America, populated with antique and gift shops selling delightful Amish-made quilts and goods, colorful farmers' markets, quaint B&Bs ... and some of the country's most notorious, most shocking, and utterly heartbreaking puppy mills.

Behind the charming façade and bucolic image lies a stark and very dark reality. While clearly not all Amish people are involved in puppy mills, the community overall has become America's biggest puppy broker. And there are no AKC champions issuing from the hundreds of dogs that live in cramped, often dirty, wire cages that stretch the length of barns and shacks, purposely kept from sight of the curious or concerned. The animals' living conditions are devoid of even the most basic comforts: no windows or ventilation, no resting boards or blankets, no bowls of water (usually only a water bottle from which all take turns drinking), no decent food, just cheap scraps – sometimes no more than concoctions of maple syrup mixed with water. Cage after cage is packed full of puppies, unable to stand or turn, wiggle or squirm, play, or even simply breathe without stepping all over each other.

And that's how they live, big and small, day after day, out of



public view until they make their way all over the country to pet stores or testing laboratories or, for the "lucky" ones, into nice, average American homes. Unless, of course, they simply die first from illnesses for which there's no home-grown remedy. These dogs, after all, are largely expendable. Why pay for veterinary care when another litter can be produced for no cost at all?

What an irony that in a country where we spent \$32.8 billion on our pets last year, a nation where 63 percent of us share our lives with one pet and 45 percent of us with more than one, millions of the creatures we say we love are born and live in dire misery.

And how incongruous that, at a time when shelters and humane societies are bowing to pressure to stop killing homeless animals, when anti-cruelty laws are getting stronger in almost every state in the union, when the courts are beginning to recognize the unique bond that exists between humans and companion animals, that such



an industry could not only exist but thrive, growing annually.

The reasons, sadly, are the same as ever: money and apathy. People see an easy way to get big bucks by letting cats and dogs do the work for them, and the public at large closes its eyes, shakes a collective head, and asks rhetorically, “It’s sad, but what can you do?”

The investigator

Chris De Rose is hard at work in his office on a Saturday. The head of Last Chance for Animals (LCA) has his hands full putting together a report on his latest investigation of Amish puppy mills. Of all the animal welfare organizations, large and small, LCA is virtually the only one actively working on the ground to shut the industry down. De Rose knows a thing or two about undercover investigations. He’s an ex-cop, and none of the big national organizations can claim his expertise on what kind of evidence to gather and how to gather it. He knows exactly what it takes to arm himself with the ammunition needed to bring about a prosecution.

De Rose and his Special Investigations Unit have spent countless hours at puppy mills. He’s turned up on farms trying to speak with owners. He’s been snubbed, driven away, and even chased off by gun-toting puppy millers. He also knows that the Amish have a unique position in the industry. Not only are they leaders, but their very way of life, their entire persona, helps them to continually avoid interference in their business.

“Nobody’s really interested in doing anything about the Amish because they bring in so much tourism,” says De Rose. “They’re an important economic feature to the community.”

Indeed, Lancaster County’s tourist information home-page boasts its top attraction as “The Amish.” Hershey, home to chocolate and a great theme weekend for families, only gets a brief mention, and you have to search mighty hard to find details about nearby Gettysburg, one of the nation’s most important historical sites. But everything you want to know about the Amish is there, from tours of their farms to museums dedicated to their way of life.

What the tourism machine doesn’t note is that what we think of as Amish culture has changed drastically in the past decades. While picturesque images from the film *Witness* may still populate the minds of many, the Amish are far from being entrenched in times past. “There are so many different sects of Amish,” De Rose says. “As well as the Old Order Mennonites, the ones that were depicted in *Witness*, there’s also the ‘Black Bumper’ Mennonites. They’re called that because they own and drive cars, but the cars are all black. They can’t have any chrome to see their reflection.

“And even the Old Order Mennonites and Amish don’t live the way they used to. They’re very happy to accept rides in cars; they just don’t own them. And the notion that they don’t have modern

conveniences is completely wrong. These families own computers, telephones and machinery. They simply keep them in the barn rather than in the house. As long as nothing is in the home, they’re following their religion. One of the fastest growing ways they sell their puppies is on the Internet. They use it all the time.”

There are numerous online pet sites that Amish puppy mills use to sell their dogs, masquerading as caring pet owners or nurturing, small home breeders. It’s not always easy to spot one of these breeders. For those familiar with the culture, a name could give a clue. Phone numbers in the 717 area code are a safe bet, but the community has spread beyond Lancaster County into Ohio, large parts of upstate New York, Indiana, Illinois and Missouri. And they’re willing to ship their dogs anywhere.

But it’s not just puppies that earn the Amish money. When dogs are too old or spent to breed one more time, the Amish take them to auctions and sell them mostly to laboratories so their lives of misery can continue unabated. Animal rescuers attend as often as possible, often pooling resources, trying to purchase as many dogs as they can to save them from that fate.

Of course, it’s not just the Amish who run puppy mills – they’re merely at the top of the heap. The entire Midwest is thriving miller territory; parts of the South host numerous mills; and now Nevada and Arizona are becoming home to people who see good money in the puppy trade. It is an annual multimillion-dollar industry.

So how is it that puppy mills are flourishing? Because the entire system, says De Rose, fosters their survival.

Unlike individuals, who are subject to animal welfare laws, puppy mills are not. In fact, breeders who hold a license fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA),



Photo: Keystone Golden Retriever Rescue, Inc.

not local animal control agencies, who therefore have no authority to inspect puppy mills or issue citations for welfare violations. The same people that inspect our meat for safety are charged with overseeing conditions in puppy mills. The problem is that both class A dealers (who breed puppies and kittens) and B dealers (who are licensed to sell animals already alive to retailers and laboratories) view the animals as livestock, and under the eyes of the law, that’s exactly what they are.

Of course, there are some laws and restrictions, but the USDA isn’t particularly concerned about investigating puppy mills. Prosecutions are rare and citations provide little more than a slap on the wrist in the form of a ridiculously low fine. A miller might be told to clean up feces or make sure barns are heated in winter, but there’s very little oversight and too few inspectors. With the agency’s main focus on keeping the human food supply untainted, the fate of dogs (and kittens) is far down on the list.

Even when the USDA is brought evidence of the horrific conditions that a particular breeder is exposing his animals to, they’re slow to investigate.

“The whole system, especially the USDA, is a farce,” says De Rose. “Puppy mills are just rampant and they’re growing in leaps and bounds. All you have to do to get a class A license is pay \$10, fill out a piece of paper, and show that you have a place you can keep the animals. If, on the off chance, they’re brought up on criminal charges for something, they always get off, mostly because of poor paperwork. It doesn’t stipulate that conditions have to be this or that ... they end up with an infraction and a \$100 fine. It is the biggest racket there is, and the USDA is the culprit. They turn their back on it all. If they were enforcing the Animal Welfare Act the way they should be, this wouldn’t be happening.”

But when it’s merely animals who are affected, and tourism dollars are at stake, most officials who have the power to act turn a blind eye instead. That is, until humans are “harmed.” That’s where the Puppy Lemon Law comes into play.

The puppy mill experience

Susan Eagle knows what lies behind the barn doors in an Amish puppy mill. She found out the hard way, from one of the most notorious (and yet quite typical) Amish miller families, Daniel and Verna Esh. When Eagle and her husband lost both their Maltese and their toy poodle to old age, they were heartbroken. After moving from Florida to Philadelphia, Eagle started visiting shelters looking for two more dogs to fill the gap. Eagle wanted a Maltese again, but none were to be found. So she turned to the Internet, logging onto a Maltese breed website where she came across a message posted by a woman who had just purchased a Maltese puppy from Clearview Cute Puppies in Lancaster County: the name the Eshes gave their puppy breeding business.

After an initial phone conversation, Eagle discovered that not only did they have her much-desired Maltese puppy, but the family also raised toy poodles. In answer to her query about whether Mrs. Esh might be able to recommend a toy poodle breeder, Verna told her she was in luck. They sold toy poodles, too! It just happened to be the only other breed the family raised.

When Eagle pulled into the farm after a two-hour drive, she was thrilled. The puppies were brought out to Eagle, who watched them scamper in the backyard. She chose two, paying full price on the spot. She was slightly disappointed to learn she’d have to return for the Maltese, since the puppy was still too young to go. But she could take home her brand-new toy poodle that very day.

When Eagle took her new little love for a checkup, her vet stared at her and asked, “Where on earth did you get this dog?” When Eagle told him she had bought him from a breeder in Lancaster County, the vet shook his head. “Susan,” he said, “those are all puppy mills.” That explained why the puppy was riddled with parasites in his stomach and ears, and a bad case of red eye.

Eagle knows that logically she should have asked for her money back for the dogs, but she had waited so long to find them and now she was invested emotionally. Learning where they really came from, she couldn’t bear to leave either back on the farm. When she went to collect the second dog, she noticed a sign listing over 20 breeds up for sale – far from the exclusive breeders the Eshes claimed to be. When she told the Eshes that she had taken the poodle to a vet and he was sickly, they dismissed her as over-reacting. They said they “didn’t believe in vets.” They could treat any illness themselves. All the dog needed was a shot, which they’d be happy to give.

Eagle asked to see inside the barn, but was stopped by Verna. Every time she tried to get close, she was directed away. She asked



AP Staff Photographer, Paul Vathis

to see the Maltese’s mother but was told that wouldn’t be possible. “We were told that they had registered dogs,” says Eagle. “When I got there and she gave me a registry, it wasn’t from the AKC, but the ACA – American Canine Association. All that does is register the name and who the dog’s parents were. It means nothing, but the puppy mills are advertising the dogs as ‘registered’ and people just don’t know the difference.”

Of course, the Maltese was sick, too. Both dogs were on medication for over a month. Eagle spent hundreds of dollars in vet bills in addition to the \$1,000 she paid for the dogs. Four years later, Alexander and Chester are both healthy and happy. But while she was nursing her animals to health, she received an e-mail from the woman who had recommended the Amish family, inquiring about the health of Eagle’s dogs. Her own Amish-raised Maltese, Sophie, had just been fitted with a liver shunt that the dog would have for life.

The dilemma: Is being kind being cruel?

Eight-year-old Katherine came home from school with one of those questions for her mom – the kind parents always struggle with, trying to decide just how much detail to provide.

“Mom, what’s a puppy mill?” she asked. Surprised, her mother asked where she had heard the term.

“Well, I told my friend that we were going to get a new dog, and she said, ‘Just don’t go to a pet store because those dogs come from puppy mills.’”

Her mother explained that they were going to adopt a dog from the shelter because dogs from pet stores most often come from places where hundreds of dogs are born and live in terrible conditions. Puppy mills were cruel places so they didn’t want to give money to people who would do that to dogs.

The child thought for a moment and then asked, “But mom, if those dogs are being treated badly, shouldn’t we go get one of them to rescue it?”

It’s difficult to explain economic realities to a child. It’s hard enough trying to explain it to adults. With millions of dogs still being destroyed every year at shelters, few can understand how anyone could be so cruel as to make their living by producing pure

misery. But the only way to shut down the puppy mills is to stop buying their product.

No one is answering the phone at the headquarters for Rufus, Inc. Nobody is sure why. It could be, animal welfare people hope, that they've followed the way of their stores in Massachusetts (dubbed Woof and Co. in that state) and have gone out of business. Or perhaps it's simply to avoid the press and the animal welfare folks out for blood after the New Jersey pet store chain landed the largest fine in the history of the Bergen County SPCA for animal cruelty.

When Woof and Co. first opened in Massachusetts a little over a year ago, its executives were quick to hype their new "upscale, lifestyle" pet stores that would cater to elite dog lovers wanting the best. They announced grand plans to roll out stores all over the country. They also insisted that their purebred pups were certainly not from puppy mills. But that was an assertion that would make lovers of semantics proud. The company's dogs all came from Hunte Corporation, a massive, Missouri-based class B broker that sells to pet stores nationwide. And the puppies Hunte sells are born and reared in puppy mills.

Protestors quickly appeared on the scene, and whistle-blower employees soon exposed what was really going on.

Laurie "Reggie" Reggiannini had been a vet tech for 17 years before being laid off and taking a temporary job at Woof and Co. She quickly became concerned about both the health of the puppies and their treatment. The first batch of dogs the new store received was healthy, she says. But from the second batch on, the dogs she saw coming into the store had numerous health problems.

The puppies were locked in cages and weren't given exercise or socialization. They were only brought out to play when a customer expressed interest, and they were returned immediately if there was no sale. They weren't fed often enough; many were hypoglycemic. Reggiannini began to complain to the management, hoping her expertise would help to change the way the dogs were handled.

"I started working there in January and in April they offered me a management position in their second store," she recounts. "I knew a lot of things were bad, but I thought I could save the world. We had 90 puppies when I became manager in the new store, and there were so many things wrong that I did nothing but complain from day one. The company said that their puppies were home-bred. But I started investigating and found out they all came from Hunte Corporation. They probably should never have hired a vet tech. I told them everything that was wrong, from the smallest things like how many times a day they wanted to feed the dogs to what happens to puppies during the week that they're transported in a truck by the hundreds. The dogs we got in had every single problem, from diarrhea to kennel cough, upper respiratory infections and worms. It's just a sad, sad life for those puppies."

Reggiannini began getting the dogs treated herself. Many were so sick they had to be euthanized. It seemed she was constantly rushing a dog to the local animal hospital with pneumonia or an umbilical hernia, kennel cough, severe vomiting – any number of serious health problems. And she presented the bills to Woof and Co. She was quickly branded a troublemaker who was cutting into the company's profits. After all, they had their own vet (who has since been called before the state licensing board for his work at the stores). They paid him \$150 for a whole day when he came in to check all of the 90 dogs. They didn't want big vet bills. Worse, although the stores had a "no returns" policy, Reggiannini readily refunded money to the increasing number of customers who wanted to bring back their very sick dogs. Since Reggiannini insisted that the dogs in

her store needed to receive appropriate medical care, management felt she had to go. She was simply costing them too much money. She was promptly fired for having a "negative attitude."

But Reggiannini wasn't the only one to blow the whistle on Woof and Co., which had now opened stores in New Jersey under the name Rufus, Inc. (most probably in an attempt to avoid the very public flack they'd gotten in Massachusetts). At their store in Paramus, New Jersey, employee Annette Ajamian was becoming increasingly upset about a Shar Pei puppy who had been delivered with a common and correctable affliction to the breed – his eyelashes curled inward, scratching the corneas continuously and causing enormous pain. Ajamian had brought it to the attention of management, who promptly removed the dog from sale, dumping him in a back room where he was left to languish for 21 days. After her repeated pleas that the dog needed treatment were ignored, Ajamian contacted the Bergen County SPCA.

An animal control officer came to the store that day and found the dog in a crate in the back. His eyes were blood red and virtually closed. He had no water to drink. The officer ordered the store employees to take the four-month-old puppy to an animal hospital immediately. But when he returned later that day to find they had ignored him, a summons was issued and the dog removed – taken by the SPCA to be given the first of three eye surgeries. When his plight was publicized, the Shar Pei ultimately landed a loving new home. Ajamian was promptly fired for reporting the abuse.

In May, executives from Rufus, Inc., pled guilty to four counts of animal cruelty over the incident. The company was fined \$9,800 in penalties, including the cost of the dog's medical care. A month later, having racked up 27 animal health violations between them, the two Woof and Co. stores in Massachusetts shut their doors for good.

Humane groups hope the much-publicized fate of those pet shops will raise the heat on the stores that the company still operates in New York, trading under the name Maxie Biggz, and in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania as Family Pet Center. But they also know that shutting them down won't stop the countless other pet shops in the U.S. that sell puppy mill puppies – or indeed the mills themselves.

LCA's De Rose hopes that other, larger animal groups, which have the resources he lacks, will get more involved in the puppy mill scandal. He also urgently needs funds to continue his investigations and campaigns. Spending so much time in the field means little time left for fundraising efforts. He and another group are already making inroads with billboard campaigns dotting Lancaster County and peaceful demonstrations in Amish towns that try to educate vacationers about what their tourist dollars are really supporting. By keeping the pressure on the USDA and the Pennsylvania state attorney, he hopes that he'll encourage more people to join in with the kind of support they've brought to the no-kill movement.

"I'm not sure we will ever get rid of puppy mills completely," De Rose says. "But if we can educate the public, expose them to what's really going on in puppy mills, and bring enough pressure to bear on politicians to change and enforce laws, we might be able to make a difference for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of suffering and dying puppies and dogs."

Until then, for puppy mill puppies and their canine parents, it truly is "a dog's life."

For more information about puppy mills, visit the Last Chance for Animals website at www.lcanimal.org.

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