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Cari Meyers: Building community awareness about puppy mills



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Chicago Pets Examiner

AMERICA INSPIRED WINNER



<http://www.examiner.com/pets-in-chicago/cari-meyers-photo-1>

Cari Meyers with a dog that had been rescued from a puppy mill.

Credits:

Janie Jenkins - The Puppy Mill Project

***Editor's note:** This article was a winner in the Leadership category of the America Inspired Contest, which celebrated extraordinary people making a difference across the United States. We invite you to read about these amazing people.*

For an updated article on Cari - [Click here.](#)

[\(http://www.examiner.com/pets-in-chicago/america-inspired-finalist-cari-meyers-what-motivates-her-to-lead-this-cause\)](http://www.examiner.com/pets-in-chicago/america-inspired-finalist-cari-meyers-what-motivates-her-to-lead-this-cause)

Cari Meyers had been serving on the board and volunteering for a large no-kill animal shelter in Chicago when she had her "A-ha!" moment. As she learned more about the treatment of dogs in puppy mills and how the influx of puppy mill dogs was impacting the shelter system, she decided it was time to take action.

"I looked at the shelters and rescues and saw how many dogs in their care were from puppy mills. I realized you have to cut off the head of the monster to truly cut down on the number of animals that end up in the rescue system," says Cari Meyers, the founder of [The Puppy Mill Project](#).

[\(http://www.thepupppymillproject.org\)](http://www.thepupppymillproject.org) "I had been reading about puppy mills and found out that all the states bordering Illinois were the top producers of puppy mill dogs and Illinois was one of their primary markets. Yet, no one in Illinois was talking about this. That propelled me to take action."

Two years ago, Meyers quit her affiliation with the shelter and founded [The Puppy Mill Project](#)

[\(http://www.thepupppymillproject.org\)](http://www.thepupppymillproject.org). With no budget and a



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Kathy Mordini is a public relations specialist and former journalist. She is passionate about educating the public on pet adoption, pet rescue and...

small, dedicated group of volunteers, she started a grassroots effort in Chicago to educate the public and raise awareness about puppy mills and their direct connection to pet stores, Internet sites and newspaper ads that sell dogs.

Illinois' Pet Store Disclosure Act

According to Meyers, 70 percent of the general public doesn't know about puppy mills. In Chicago, they are starting to make a dent in that number. First, the organization worked with Illinois lawmakers to pass the **Illinois Pet Store Disclosure Act** (http://www.thepupppymillproject.org/know_the_law.html) that requires pet stores, shelters and rescues to display an animal's origin on or near the cage. The group has also used the freedom of information act to create a database on their own website listing **where all Illinois pet stores actually purchase their puppies.**

(http://www.thepupppymillproject.org/il_ide.html)

"When you walk into a pet store and ask about the origin of a dog, most pet store owners will tell you that the dogs come from reputable breeders and that they know them personally," says Meyers. "Now, consumers no longer have to take the word of someone trying to sell them a high-priced puppy. By law, the information should be posted on or near the cage at the store and it is posted on our **website** (http://www.thepupppymillproject.org/il_ide.html)."

Building awareness

In the meantime, the members of the organization have hit the sidewalks around Chicago to educate potential pet shop customers about puppy mills. They have staged protests outside pet stores and shopping malls that are home to pet stores. In the past two years, four pet stores selling dogs purchased from puppy mills have closed their doors in the Chicago area. Four new pet stores were prevented from opening.

"If pet stores are willing to go humane, to stop selling puppies and move toward adopting out rescue animals instead, we are more than willing to help," says Meyers. "We've worked with two suburban shops to make that change; Thee Fish Bowl in Evanston is now pulling animals from Chicago Animal Care and Control. In November, Dog Patch Pet and Feed in

Naperville announced that they would stop selling dogs at the end of January. That store is now working with our volunteers through Annie's Little Angel's Rescue to pull dogs from death row at Chicago Animal Care and Control, get them vetted and adopt them out."

Another suburban pet store, Wilmette Pet, stopped selling dogs and cats a year ago on its own. The store had a long-term relationship and had been fostering pets for many years for Adopt-a-Pet. Since the end of last year, all of the space formerly used for the puppies and kittens that had been sold in the store is now reserved for the kittens, cats, puppies and dogs it fosters for that organization. With the added exposure, Adopt-A-Pet has seen a dramatic increase in adoptions and Wilmette Pet has seen an increase in new customers that didn't shop in the store when puppies and kittens were being sold. Although the Puppy Mill Project wasn't involved in this transformation, Meyers says its a wonderful example how independant pet shops may go humane using partners in the rescue community.

Community outreach

Along with staging protests, the organization also sets up informational booths in areas where they will reach a lot of animal lovers: community and pet-focused events. They have worked a lot with breed-specific rescues, most of which rescue dogs from puppy mills and take in dogs that were sold in pet stores and relinquished by owners, to help them educate as well.

In the past, the group has also placed ads on CTA buses and has an educational billboard at one of the busiest junctions of the Kennedy Expressway during this holiday season. They are now focusing on changing the laws in Chicago to ban the sale of companion animals in pet stores and force pet shops that deal in animal sales to work with shelters or rescues to adopt animals instead.

"I applaud the shelters and rescues and all they do to save, rehabilitate and rehome animals. But, the mills truly are the front lines," adds Meyers. "There just isn't enough room in the shelters for all the animals needing homes. People purchase dogs and when they realize they don't want them anymore or can't afford medical care because the puppy they purchased

was sick, those dogs end up in a shelter. In the end, more and more animals are being put down.”

The front lines

Meyers points out that there are organizations like the National Mill Dog Rescue that are on the true front lines every day, rescuing and rehabilitating dogs from puppy mills. As her own organization grows, more and more of the breed rescues and other rescues from Illinois that have also been on the front line rescuing dogs from the mills have become partners in her organization.

“There is no turning back now – this is my life,” says Meyers. “Even if you don’t have a pet, you can’t possibly subscribe to animal cruelty. When there is a horrific story about animal cruelty in the news, we all get upset by this. But, few reporters are looking at the puppy mills, and the animals left behind in the mills are being treated horrifically each day. It won’t end until people stop purchasing the cute puppies in the pet stores.”

Learn more about the Puppy Mill Project [online](http://www.thepupppymillproject.org) (<http://www.thepupppymillproject.org>) or follow them on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/thepupppymillproject) (<https://www.facebook.com/thepupppymillproject>).

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