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Puppy Mill Project activists with Gov. Quinn during the signing of HB 5772, the Pet Store Disclosure Act. Image courtesy of the Puppy Mill Project.



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Every Saturday, regardless of weather, Tina Smith and her partner, Stacey, join a handful of demonstrators outside a local pet shop to protest against the sale of "puppy mill" puppies.

"It's amazing how many people don't know," said Smith, an activist with The Puppy Mill Project (TPMP), a Chicago organization that works to educate people about the puppy mill industry.

Smith has been teaching people about puppy mills since she joined TPMP in 2009. Now, she wants to educate her LGBTQ peers on puppy mills.

"We feel it's our community, and we need to spread the word," Smith said. "So many of my friends, gay and lesbian, pets are such a big part of our lives. Our community and every community needs to learn the truth."

Smith said that most people who buy from pet stores believe they're getting a better dog than they would from a shelter. But she said, that's usually false. "They get drawn into the idea that if they spend \$1,800 on a U.S.D.A breeder, they're getting top of the line," she said. "That's not the case at all."

Best Friends Animal Society estimates that 4 million dogs are born in puppy mills every year. Most of them are sold in pet shops and on the Internet. TPMP asserts that 99 percent of puppies found in pet stores come from mills.

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WINDY CITY TIMES



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WINDY CITY TIMES



Puppy mills are technically legal in the United States. In order to be certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A), mills can meet minimum requirements for keeping livestock, not pets. Cages need only be six inches longer than the dogs on each side, and breeding dogs can legally be caged for their entire lives. Further, breeders that sell over the Internet do not need to be U.S.D.A-certified at all.

"Any time someone is willing you send you a puppy without ever meeting you, that's a red flag," Smith said. "You want someone who will interrogate you as much as you will them."

Smith said that responsible breeders breed dogs as a passion, not a business. They allow potential pet owners to come to their homes and see the parents. They ask pet buyers detailed questions about their readiness to own a dog. And they never ship pets to people.

Last August, seven dogs overheated and died on an O'Hare runway after an American Airlines flight. The incident raised questions for traveling pet owners, but it also sparked criticism of companies that ship dogs—mainly Internet puppy companies. Many Internet companies dress up websites with pictures of happy dogs and owners, making grand claims about the quality and cuteness of their dogs. But, Smith said, this is a bait-and-switch tactic, used to mask the sale of puppy mill puppies.

Images in TPMP literature paint a grisly picture of life for puppy mill puppies. But while some might be tempted to write off TPMP activists as fanatics, many of their claims about the horrors of puppy mills are backed by major national organizations like the Humane Society of the United States.

The Humane Society's Internet videos flash images of puppies caged tightly together, underfed and living in their own filth. According to the Humane Society, these animals get no human contact. While some people might be tempted to "save" puppies from that reality, experts say that buying puppy mill puppies is not the answer.

"A lot of people think they're doing a good thing by buying a puppy and getting it out of the pet store," said one woman in a Humane Society video. "All that does is tell the pet store owner 'I sold that one. I could go buy another one.'"

TPMP encourages people to think about adopting dogs before purchasing them. Smith said that a lot of people worry that animals in shelters are "damaged goods," but she said shelter animals are screened for genetic defects. Puppy mills often reproduce those defects, selling sick puppies that fall ill after their "warranty" runs out. The Humane Society reports that many puppy mill puppies also suffer behavioral problems because of early abuse.

Adopting can also be cheaper than purchasing dogs. Pet shop puppies can be listed for more than \$1,500, while shelter animals can be adopted (shots and spaying/neutering included) for less than \$400.

TPMP protests Chicago-area pet shops that sell puppies from mills each week. So far, the group has been successful in facilitating the closing a few pet shops. Also, two others—Thee Fish Bowl Pets (600 Dempster, Evanston) and the Wilmette Pet Center (625 Green Bay Road)—stopped selling puppy-mill puppies and only facilitated adoptions and/or bought from reputable breeders. Moreover, the businesses have puppies for adoption; they get shelter dogs and have people adopt them.

Barb Herman, who owns Thee Fish Bowl, was featured in Windy City Times in April 2001. In that article, she talked about her decision to only sell humanely bred puppies. "We deal with very reputable people, individual private breeders in the area, and we check them out too," she said. "All pet shops could do what we do, but it's a lot of hard work and we don't take short cuts, we take it seriously."

Herman called Thee Fish Bowl an "exception" and said she usually discourages people from buying pet-shop dogs.

In January, the Pet Disclosure Law took effect in Illinois, making it mandatory for pet stores to list breeder information on dog cages. Smith said the bill is important, but it is not the solution. TPMP is gearing up to fight against puppy mills at a federal level. However, if history is any indicator, that fight will not be easy. Smith said many anti-puppy mill activists have received threats from breeders. When pressed about the nature of those threats, Smith shuffled in her chair and said she could not talk about them for fear that they would give people ideas.

Still, Smith is undaunted. "I'm not a wave-maker," she said. "I have never felt this way about anything in my entire life."

Potential pet owners who want to buy humanely bred dogs can locate specific breeds, including purebreds, at <http://www.petfinder.com>. For more information on TPMP and reputable breeders, check out <http://www.thepuppymillproject.org>.



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