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## Puppies Aren't Presents – spotlight moves to Chicago's Hispanic Community



Kathy Mordini, Chicago Pets Examiner

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The move is on to educate people in Chicago and across the country about dogs from puppy mills sold in pet stores and through the Internet. Chicago's Hispanic community is no exception.

"There is such a need to educate the Hispanic community because many people come from places where they don't have puppy mills," says Diego Leon who is *the Puppy Mill Project's* liaison to the Hispanic Community. "There isn't an actual translation for "puppy mill" in Spanish. What does exist doesn't have a bad connotation, so it's not associated with a bad thing."

Leon runs his own pet-focused business – *iPet Chicago* – a pet sitting and dog walking service. Because of his love of animals, he's become involved in animal welfare and rescue. His whole philosophy is to have a positive impact on the lives of pets. As he learned more about the abuses that go on in puppy mills and about the sale of these dogs in pet stores, he knew he needed focus his message in his own community.

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Diego Leon, with his two rescue dogs, has been working to educate the Hispanic community about dogs sold in pet stores and the puppy mill connection.

Credits: Diego Leon

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don't know where to go for pets," says Leon. "The pet store owners are out to make a buck and they do all they can to make it look like the puppies they sell come from healthy parents. In the Hispanic community, people don't know what goes on behind the scenes and they just assume that dogs sold in pet stores have *come from good breeders.*"

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Because people don't know, there is consumer fraud from all angles. The puppies sold in pet stores are removed from their parents too young and many are sick when sold or have health problems soon after. Dogs are sold on credit at high rates of interest with no credit check. When a dog gets sick or the person realized they are no longer able to afford the dog, it ends up at Chicago Animal Care and Control or with an animal rescue organization.

"The pet store owners only see the dollar signs and they just don't care where the dogs are placed and who is buying their dogs," says Leon. "If a gang banger comes in and wants to purchase 10 dogs, they will sell him 10 dogs and call it a great sale. They are not concerned that these puppies may be used as bait in dogfights. They just don't care. As I've gone out in the community, I've found a few that do care but they are rare."

Leon is now working within the Hispanic community to set up educational programs in schools, churches and community centers. The goal is to change the mentality at an early age so

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"Abuse of animals is so frequently connected domestic violence and those that breed dogs in puppy mills are no exception," says Leon. "If they'll treat dogs that way, how do they treat people? Domestic violence is such a huge issue in the Hispanic community, I'm working hard with people at the domestic violence center to educate, be an advocate and to link together this cycle of abuse."

That education extends to teaching the community about shelters and rescues. He is encouraging those in his community to learn more about pet adoption, how shelters and rescues work and maybe even volunteer first to learn more about the commitment and patience it takes when you add a pet to the family. He suggests more families consider adopting adult or senior dogs and that they all take the time to do the math before purchasing a pet – taking into account veterinary bills, food, who will care for a pet when you go out of town, etc.

The education continues this weekend. Supporters of the Puppy Mill Project and concerned community members will hold an *informational, peaceful protest* outside Joe's Pet Salon on Cermak on Saturday, December 17 from noon until 2 p.m. After the protest, efforts will continue in the community as they reach out to educate residents about puppy mills and their connection to pets sold in pet stores.

"The good news is that when we've talked to school kids to educate them, they've done a great job educating their parents," says Leon. "We just need to keep the momentum going and continue to get the word out."

The Puppy Mill Project worked with Illinois lawmakers to help bridge the gap of information through the *Illinois Pet Store Disclosure Act*. As of January 1, 2011, pet stores in Illinois are required to post breeder information on or near the cages of the animals they are selling. The information should be openly posted and stores are breaking the law if consumers must ask for the information. Through the Illinois Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture, the organization now has lists of the breeders or brokers that supplied the dogs, the number of dogs bred each year by each factory farm and where the animals are sold. The



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Learn more about the Puppy Mill Project *online*, *find breeder and store information* and *Illinois Pet Store Disclosure Act*. You may also follow the Puppy Mill Project on *Facebook*.

*Do you volunteer or work for a shelter or rescue that has programs you'd like to promote? Do you work in a pet-related business that has an interesting story to tell. If so, contact me at [kathypetexam@gmail.com](mailto:kathypetexam@gmail.com). Enjoy this article? Receive email alerts when new articles become available. Just click on the **subscribe** button above. You may also follow me on *Twitter*, *Facebook* or *read my blog*.*

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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...

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