



*It involves not
only passing
humane laws,
but thwarting
the industry's
ever-expanding
sales tactics*

Stopping puppy mills

BY LIZ FINCH





IMAGINE YOU'RE WALKING PAST A PET STORE and you see a pile of playful puppies in the window. It's hard to resist the urge to go inside and scoop one up. When Mindi Callison passed a Petland store in West Des Moines, Iowa, over a decade ago, she couldn't resist that impulse. Once she was inside the store, she says, "A salesperson put this puppy in my hands and said, 'Look, he loves you. You're his mommy.' Then they offered me a store credit card so I could afford him."

At the time, Mindi was a broke 19-year-old college student who clearly couldn't afford to purchase a dog from a pet store. Even so, she walked out of the store that day with Ozzy, a blue-eyed Siberian husky puppy with a \$1,500 price tag.

"They sold me the puppy, the toys, the treats, the kennel — everything on a credit card with a 30% interest rate," she recalls. Mindi had stumbled into the world of puppy mill dogs, though she only realized it a few weeks later when she saw a news segment revealing the source of Petland's inventory.

"Those dogs came from puppy mills, which are notorious for churning out sickly purebreds," she says. Plus, puppy mills are

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~ Mindi Callison, founder of *Bailing Out Benji*

notorious for being poorly regulated places where the purpose of keeping dogs is to create furry babies who can be shipped to stores while they're at their cutest — and typically too young to be away from their mothers.

You may think 30% sounds like a high interest rate, but Mindi got off easy by today's standards. Some pet stores now offer

financing as high as 188%, a predatory-lending tactic that creates serious financial hardship for buyers who simply can't resist the cuteness despite the price tag. Sometimes the loan terms even obligate people to ongoing payments for a pet who is deceased.

Though Mindi's first worry upon seeing that news segment was that her new dog might get extremely sick or have health issues forever, her thoughts soon turned to the fate of his parents and grandparents, the dogs who spend their entire lives in cramped, filthy cages and are bred over and over again. "I left the store physically, but my heart never left," she says.

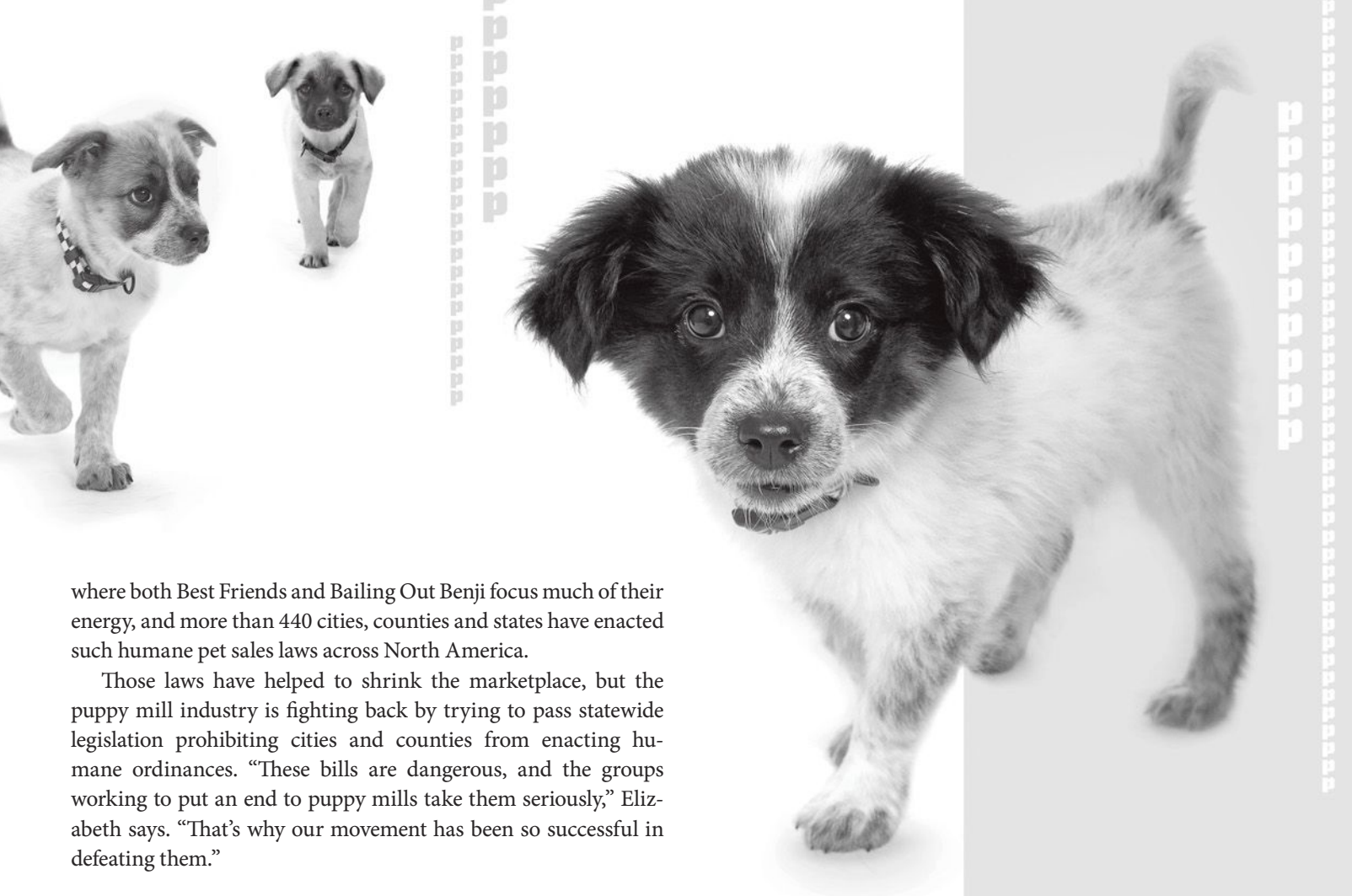
TRANSFORMING EMOTIONS INTO ACTION

As she pondered the unhappy fate of generations of dogs in puppy mills, Mindi was inspired to start a blog called *Bailing Out Benji*. By 2014, that blog had evolved into a nonprofit organization of the same name, which started organizing peaceful protests outside of major retailers that buy puppies from commercial breeders.

The model for such protests was developed in part by Elizabeth Oreck before she joined Best Friends in 2008. The purpose of the protests was to make sure consumers understood exactly how those adorable bundles of fluff in the pet store window came to be there. "When I started, few people knew what a puppy mill was — until Oprah did a show about them," says Elizabeth, who's the national manager of puppy mill initiatives for Best Friends. "Then suddenly the public understood what life is like for a puppy mill dog."

Public pressure has helped many stores convert to a humane model in which stores get their dogs from shelters and rescue groups. Despite that pressure, *Bailing Out Benji's* research shows that there are still roughly 600 stores in the U.S. selling puppy mill dogs. That includes Petland, the largest national chain procuring puppies from commercial breeders.

Elizabeth sensed that more headway could be made by focusing on passing sensible and effective legislation designed to stop local pet stores from selling dogs bred in puppy mills. Today, that's



where both Best Friends and Bailing Out Benji focus much of their energy, and more than 440 cities, counties and states have enacted such humane pet sales laws across North America.

Those laws have helped to shrink the marketplace, but the puppy mill industry is fighting back by trying to pass statewide legislation prohibiting cities and counties from enacting humane ordinances. “These bills are dangerous, and the groups working to put an end to puppy mills take them seriously,” Elizabeth says. “That’s why our movement has been so successful in defeating them.”

RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT ONLINE SALES

In addition to their own legislative efforts, the commercial breeding industry employs several other tactics to keep business booming. Some of the most robust exist in a sphere out of reach of peaceful protests and local laws: the online marketplace.

“When I started working on this, there were no online animal sales,” Elizabeth says. “I never thought it was going to happen. Sending hundreds or thousands of dollars to a total stranger to get

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a dog you’ve never met who will be part of your family for 15 years: It never occurred to me that people would do that.”

While a brick-and-mortar business has to make sure they have puppies on hand for people to snuggle, businesses that sell pets on the internet don’t have those limitations. It’s easy to deceive

consumers through great-looking websites and cute pictures of dogs that are often stock images. Private kennels sell directly to consumers through their websites or via ads on sites like Craigslist, the largest online marketplace in the world.

“At any given time, there are tens of thousands of prohibited animal sales ads on Craigslist,” Elizabeth says. “Because of the lack of seller transparency, there is no way for the public to know the conditions under which the advertised pets were raised — or, for that matter, if they are advertising real animals. Consumer scams are not unusual when it comes to online sales on unregulated platforms, and anyone who sends money to a seller they’ve never met with the expectation of receiving a pet is taking a big risk.”

Craigslist has a policy against animal sales, though the site does allow people to adopt out animals for a small rehoming fee. However, the policy is not really enforced. “That policy is flagrantly violated every minute of every day,” Elizabeth says. “And sometimes you see ads for puppies being rehomed for a ‘small rehoming fee’ of \$8,000.”

It’s not surprising that consumer fraud is rampant in this industry. But it’s also an issue that elected officials should be concerned about. “Because selling puppies online is difficult to regulate and these are primarily cash sales, there is clearly a significant loss in unpaid sales and income taxes on these sales,” Elizabeth says. “States are losing much-needed revenue while sellers are making a bundle.”



Some businesses change their names to something misleading, like Animal Welfare Alliance. They advertise hypoallergenic breeds (a myth) or “teacup” versions of large-breed dogs (there’s no such thing as a teacup St. Bernard). In a frustratingly brilliant marketing strategy, they christen cross-bred dogs as a new designer breed, such as a dorkie (dachshund and Yorkshire terrier mix). “People are literally buying a super mutt for \$5,000 or more,” Mindi says.

KEEPING PACE WITH DECEPTIVE TACTICS

In addition to working on legislation and policy changes around the sourcing of dogs in retail stores, Elizabeth leads a national project to target prohibited sales ads on Craigslist for removal. “So far, our volunteers have flagged more than 150,000 ads, but the ads keep coming,” she says. “The whole puppy mill problem would disappear if people stopped buying what they are selling. We need to encourage people not to obtain their pets that way.”

The best places to find new furry family members are rescue groups and shelters, where you can adopt a fully vetted, vaccinated, spayed or neutered, and microchipped pet who needs a home and will be grateful to you for providing one. “A lot of shelters in the U.S. are really struggling with their lifesaving,” Elizabeth says. “There are amazing dogs of all types, sizes and ages who are at risk of losing their lives simply because shelters are under-resourced or there aren’t enough people stepping up to adopt.”

Knowing which sources of pets are ethical is a continued focus of Mindi’s work, both in Iowa and around the country through

volunteers in every state. She wants consumers to be aware of the industry tricks used to get inventory in front of people searching for a new dog. “If you type in ‘Siberian huskies near me,’ the websites that pop up first are typically paid ads or ones that have dogs available all the time,” she says. It’s a sign, she explains, that those dogs might be coming from a puppy mill.

In addition to educating yourself, Mindi stresses the importance of educating your community. She suggests emailing city council members to let them know you don’t want local pet stores

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selling pets from mills. If there already are such stores in your area, resist the urge to go in, especially if you think you might be tempted to “rescue” one of the puppies for sale. “It’s a mistake a lot of well-meaning people make,” Elizabeth says. “All it does is create a space for another puppy mill dog to be sold, continuing the cycle of unethical breeding for profit.”

It’s something Mindi probably wishes she had done a dozen years ago, except that going into Petland that day inspired her to become an advocate. Today, though, she has no problem avoiding those stores — because she knows what those adorable puppies represent.

“We understand boycotting products, and it’s the same for puppies,” Mindi says. “The only difference is they’re right in front of you so it’s harder to walk away. But it’s all supply and demand; that’s how the pet industry sees dogs, so animal advocates have to see them that way, too.”

But there is reason to be hopeful. In the past decade, we have made tremendous progress when it comes to puppy mills. “We still have a lot more work to do, but I am very optimistic,” Elizabeth says. “I truly believe that if we stay on this path, we will get to a day when adoption is everyone’s first choice when bringing a pet into the family, and unethical breeders will no longer be an option. Working together, we will put puppy mills in the past.” 🐾

For more information about puppy mills and what you can do to stop them, go to bestfriends.org/pupourcemills.

