

**PETS, LIES & VIDEOTAPE:
EXPOSING PET SHOP CONSUMER FRAUD AND ABUSE IN NEW JERSEY**

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THE POWER OF THE PEN

In March 2002, a letter to the editor in my local weekly newspaper caught my eye. Titled "Don't Buy from Puppy Mills," the letter was written by a woman named Barbara who purchased a sick puppy from a pet shop in Flemington. She described in detail her troubles with the pet shop owner over the health problems of her newly purchased puppy. Her words "this experience opened the door to the shady world of a puppy store" were cause to pause. Hmm, "shady world" - I was intrigued. Her letter went on to alert readers about the pitfalls of buying puppies from pet shops and described puppy mills, explained the NJ Pet Purchase Protection Act and how her consumer rights were being violated.

I knew a great deal about puppy mills but had no idea that a pet shop in my own county was selling puppy mill puppies, and sick ones at that. What I learned after my initial contact with Barbara changed the direction my decades-long work for animals had taken and launched the two of us and others into unearthing a network of consumer fraud, animal abuse, deceptive business practices and more.

Barbara put me in touch with others who recently purchased sick puppies from the pet shop, Flemington Puppies. The owner, Fred Reingold, was refusing to refund any vet bills. We scheduled a meeting to discuss strategy and invited an attorney friend of Barbara's, a local reporter and a city councilperson. The attorney happened to not only love dogs, but was instrumental in ousting from his town

another pair of unscrupulous pet shop owners, Peter Mayes and Charles Guthrie. He felt Reingold might somehow be linked to the other two since their "method of operation" seemed to eerily parallel each other. In a statement to the director of the Flemington Health Department, Reingold denied ever knowing or hearing of Peter Mayes.

The attorney loaned us his old files to sort through. We were already suspicious of the registration and breeder paperwork that each customer was given at the time of purchase, and after careful examination of paperwork from the older cases in Scotch Plains (Union County), and comparing them to Fred's paperwork, we reached the same conclusion: these guys were definitely in collusion and there seemed to be a whole lot of fraud going on.

As one who was familiar with Pennsylvania puppy mills and breeders, I recognized the common names of Amish and Mennonite puppy millers, namely Nathan Myer, Amos Stoltzfus, David Zimmerman and Melvin Nolt, among others, scattered haphazardly throughout the paperwork from the various stores. Over the last decade, these same breeders were mentioned in several tri-state newspaper articles that were critical of Pennsylvania's puppy mills. Using USDA dealer lists and inspection reports, we knew the exact addresses of these breeders, but Reingold and his cohorts skewed the information in what we believed was an attempt, for whatever reason, to throw the buyer off track. On some forms, we saw Myer living in

Zimmerman's town and Stoltzfus's town (Lititz) was changed to the name of his road (Elm) and so on. It didn't make sense. The most conspicuous piece of misinformation was the placement of Nathan Myer in Oklahoma!

Moving on to the canine registration papers, we discovered more problems. The only option available to Fred's buyers for registering their dogs was the Global Kennel Club (GKC), a registry we were not familiar with. Upon further investigation, we learned that a dog registry with the same name was based in Kansas yet, strangely, the \$25 registration application fee was to be sent to a post office box in Berkeley Heights, NJ. The certificates that were returned to the buyers were shoddy, at best, and to top it off, the word "Official" was misspelled as "offical." We contacted the legitimate Global Kennel Club in Kansas and told its president what was going on. Soon Reingold was ordered by GKC's attorney to cease and desist from using the name Global Kennel Club or face legal action. But it didn't stop there.

In June, Reingold high-tailed it out of Flemington just as the local health department was closing in. He had just settled his dispute with his Flemington Puppies customers, who sued him in civil court. Fred opened Pups Plus in Springfield, Union County, without a fuss from the local officials and before the bad publicity hit the media. We found Reingold firmly ensconced in his new store the day after he opened and in the parking lot unloading puppies in cages from an Avis van, was a squat, burly looking man. It was only a few short weeks before complaints started rolling in to the local health department and consumer affairs. Pups Plus was forced to

close within 7 months of opening because of the soaring number of complaints regarding the sale of sick animals and unsanitary store conditions. The health department also discovered that Reingold was keeping and treating puppies, who were sick with the deadly parvovirus, in his own home!

THE NAME GAME

Weeks passed as we pored over, sorted and copied the paperwork. Every corner we turned, the same names - both breeder and former pet shop owners - kept surfacing. We searched archives of the NJ Star Ledger and found more than a dozen articles on Peter Mayes dating back more than a dozen years. Guthrie's name popped up in articles for selling sick animals in his stores in Burlington County, NJ and Bucks County, PA. Mayes and Guthrie previously owned pet shops in New Jersey, and surprisingly, both had been charged with and pleaded guilty to animal cruelty. Now they were nowhere to be found - or so we thought.

The names of the pet shops that were owned or managed by this group also held striking similarities. For example, all the pet shops in question had the words "puppies" or "pups" in their names and their storefront signs had the same "look" - fat, puffy-shaped P's. We had Adorable Pups; Puppies; Puppies Just-4-U; Puppies Inc.; Flemington Puppies; Just Pups; Choice Puppies; Puppy Palace; Puppyland and Pups Plus. Each one opened and closed in surrounding towns and counties within a year's time. The attorney's files held incredible clues: the names of the licensees and managers of the stores: Guthrie, Mayes, Reingold, Brady, along with a couple of others which at the time, were a mystery to us. Before long, we

determined that these pet shop owners were linked to each other in more ways than one. Then, in May, 2002, word came from a local resident in Toms River, Ocean County about another pet store that was on the verge of opening, 90 miles east of Hunterdon County.

That store was called Puppies-n-Puppies and its owner was Matt Brady. We were beginning to connect the dots.

MORE PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

Two years earlier, in August of 2000, Carol Araneo was trying to figure out who was placing "unwanted pets wanted" ads in her local paper and why. Carol, a seasoned animal advocate, thought these ads smacked of something sinister and, in fact, could be "buncher" ads. For the novice, bunchers are unlicensed people who acquire dogs, usually by theft or through deceptive means, for resale to research facilities by way of licensed brokers. Class B dealers are USDA licensees who buy animals obtained from "random sources" for resale to research facilities. Some random sources include strays, stolen pets, seized shelter or pound animals, animals purchased at flea markets--and pets found through "free to good home" ads. The practice of obtaining pound or shelter animals for resale to research facilities is known as "pound seizure" and is illegal in New Jersey, PA and New York.

Tips began to pour into the NJ State SPCA and a local animal shelter. A police report was filed. When phoned by police, the man at the other end of the line identified himself as "Matthew Brady" and said he was only the driver and declined to give further information about his friend who "ran the business."

According to the police report, Brady said that he "charges a fee to pick up unwanted animals and that the purebreds would go to a breeder while mutts would go to farms in Pennsylvania."

Brady, who answered the phone with "Find a Pet", told Carol, who posed as one who wanted to give up her animals, that "animals coming from this area would go to a pet shop called Mr. Snuggles" and that he is associated with "Global Kennel Club." Carol obtained a copy of the "surrender form" Brady had people sign when they turned over their unwanted pets to him. The address on the surrender form was a P.O. Box in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey.

In November the suspicious ads disappeared, but the Monmouth County SPCA placed notices in local papers asking "anyone who released a pet to an individual possibly named Matt, promising good home or placement to call the SPCA immediately." Surprisingly, no one came forward and although the episode was quietly forgotten, certain people remained cautious.

In May, 2002, I sent an e-mail to various e-lists asking for information on Fred Reingold, Peter Mayes and Charles Guthrie and listed the names of the Amish and Mennonite breeders I had taken from the files. Within a day a forwarded e-mail came in from someone who knew Carol, and to whom Carol had simply written: "Look! Someone else looking for our guys." Unbeknownst to me and many others at the time, Carol was in the midst of trying to prevent a guy named Matt Brady from opening up a pet shop in Toms River called Puppies-n-Puppies while we were working on the "Fred case."

Thus began an alliance with Carol as we began sharing information daily about "our guys", as they came to be known. It would be several months before we would meet in person.

TROUBLE - n- TROUBLE

Carol was all too familiar with Brady's background and affiliation with Mayes, Guthrie and Reingold and brought this information to the attention of Toms River officials. In a nutshell, after the town initially refused his license application and delayed several hearings regarding the matter, Brady sued the town for a license and obtained one. We later learned through court documents that Brady was keeping puppies in the back of his store in anticipation of opening for business. The days turned into weeks and some of the puppies died, while others were surrendered by Brady to a local animal shelter. Upon their arrival at the shelter, more puppies were found to be so ill and in such bad shape that they had to be euthanized. The rest were placed into foster homes, rehabilitated and adopted. The unfortunate episode was never brought to the attention of local authorities; otherwise, Brady's store might never have opened.

Carol and I finally met several months later in Toms River and together visited Brady's new store. According to Carol, Puppies-n-Puppies was set-up just like the other stores that had been previously closed down: all stores were located in small strip malls and had basic wire cages/crates on the floor which were stuffed with puppies of all sizes and breeds. The only other item for sale in the store was dog food. It had been the same in Fred's stores. Crudely hand-

printed index cards with the breed of the puppy, the last name of the breeder and the state of PA were taped to the wall behind the cages. The now-familiar names of Myer, Stoltzfuz, Zimmerman, Kaufmann, and Nolt resurfaced.

On our first visit, the stench rising from the dirty cages was horrible and the puppies were lethargic and appeared to be sickly. Many people before us had reported the same conditions to the local health department. For months, little or nothing changed.

We asked ourselves, how do so many PA puppies from the same breeders end up in the same stores owned or run by the same people? Who is the supplier or brokers and how do they get the puppies? Carol believed it was Mayes who was supplying dogs to Brady and Reingold, but we needed proof. Paperwork might hold the key, and we knew of only one way to get it: we placed an ad in the local paper in hopes that customers would contact us with the information we wanted.

In our ad, we asked people who purchased sick puppies from local pet stores and who had unpaid veterinary bills or problems with dog registration papers to contact us. Several Puppies-n-Puppies customers came forward, but so did several dozen other unhappy customers who wanted to file complaints against pet shops in Ocean, Monmouth and neighboring counties.

Hearing the incredible stories of what happened to these buyers after they purchased their puppies (once they learned their animals were sick and contacted the pet shop owners) was enough to convince us there were serious, egregious problems in the pet shop puppy business. It appeared that laws were not being enforced; customers were being

defrauded and blamed for their animals' health problems. Animals, too, were suffering.

And so the idea was hatched to form a group which would address the needs of both pet shop consumers *and* animals. New Jersey Consumers Against Pet shop Abuse (NJCAPSA) was formally structured and incorporated as a non-profit organization to meet the demand of consumer requests for help in understanding their rights under New Jersey puppy-lemon laws.

AN EDUCATED CONSUMER IS NOT THEIR BEST CUSTOMER!

In the two years since our formation, NJCAPSA has heard from more than 150 consumers who have encountered difficulties when dealing with pet store owners and employees over the purchase of sick puppies. For many, education came too late and at a high price, both financially and emotionally.

The majority of consumers complained of sick puppies within 1-3 days of purchasing them. Kennel cough and pneumonia were and continue to be the top two non-congenital health problems seen in young, newly purchased puppies. Early hip dysplasia in dogs as young as five months of age is another serious problem, costing a consumer thousands of dollars to correct. Although New Jersey has a strict puppy lemon law called the Pet Purchase Protection Act (PPPA), countless numbers of consumers report that pet store owners often shout at them or tell them their puppy's health problems are their fault (not the store's) when they return with a "unfit for sale" certificate signed by a licensed veterinarian. This certificate is the consumer's most valuable and significant document, the

ticket for reimbursement under the PPPA. By state law, a consumer is entitled to up to TWICE the purchase price of the puppy to cover vet bills yet many consumers tell us they are given a slightly different version of the "Know Your Rights" form than what is required by state law. Time after time we hear accounts of intimidation, stalling and flat-out refusal of payment by store owners and/or employees leading us to believe that many customers go away in frustration, feeling they have no rights or recourse. The most distressing stories are those we hear from immigrants who have limited English-speaking skills or senior citizens who are unable to stand up to bullying tactics. Yet, the most heartbreaking stories we hear are those of a puppy's death due to pneumonia, distemper or even parvo within days of bringing them into their new home.

For current complaints, anyone who contacts NJCAPSA receives a packet that includes the full text of the NJ PPPA, Consumer Affairs regulations, and a fact sheet on the puppy lemon law. We also provide the correct contact info of the local health department and consumer affairs offices that have jurisdiction over the pet shop where they purchased their puppy. We obtain copies of the paperwork from the consumer on the sale of the puppy and because we know what to look for, we are able to point the consumer in the right direction to secure a refund of monies rightfully due them.

As advocates, we take extra steps to research the puppy's breeder and/or broker, thus able to refute the pet store owners' claims that their puppies do not come from puppy mills. If a breeder is USDA licensed, we can obtain inspection reports that indicate the number of

breeds or dogs found in a dealer's facility and what violations, if any, were present at the time of the inspection. Sometimes we discover that consumers pay "purebred" prices for mixed-breed dogs.

Speaking of pricing, we know of one store that regularly gives on-the-spot discounts if the customer wavers about buying a puppy. We've obtained paperwork that shows where a dog's price was slashed from \$3200 to \$2799 to \$2300 to a final price of \$1399 all in a matter of one visit! The same store claims it is not a pet store, but a kennel, which is deceptive advertising. New Jersey law clearly defines the difference between a dog kennel and a pet store!

Other stores advertise that they have the "best guarantee" in the business or the state, yet treat their customers horribly once they return for reimbursement for even minor veterinary bills. Many stores claim their puppies are "hand-picked" when what they really mean is that the puppies are hand-picked from the back of the broker's truck at time of delivery. And what about the most outrageous claim of all, that the store deals only with the "best breeders"? No ethical, responsible breeder alive sells puppies to pet stores. It just doesn't happen. 99% of all pet shop puppies come from puppy mills, period.

Finally, we take issue with another scam being perpetrated on unsuspecting consumers: the use of the "extended pet health warranty" forced on buyers at the time of purchase by at least three NJ pet shops. The company in question is "Household Pet Protection, Inc." based in Colorado and is supposedly responsible for reimbursing customers up to the first \$1000.00, after which the pet store

takes over. A high volume of consumers have reported they are still waiting six months to a year for a refund that by law should take only 10 days, if the pet store is in compliance.

Household Pet Protection, Inc. is in poor standing because of an unsatisfactory record with the Denver Better Business Bureau (BBB) due to a high pattern of complaints. The number of complaints processed by the Denver BBB in the last 12 months is at 43! The NJ Pet Purchase Protection Act SUPERSEDES any store guarantee so we don't understand how or why stores continue to get away with not paying their consumers in a timely period. We have reported the offending stores to the Division of Consumer Affairs and as of this date are still waiting to see if and when a "cease & desist" order will be forthcoming.

TRAVELING PUPPY PEDDLERS – THE SCAM MOST CON-ARTISTS PREFER

In addition to hearing from consumers who encounter problems with pet shops, we also receive e-mails and calls from people who have been scammed by "breeders" who sell puppies in the classified sections of local newspapers. Many times these are not breeders at all, but illegal brokers who purchase litters of puppies in Pennsylvania and bring them back to NJ for resale. Most of the complaints are concentrated in Monmouth, Gloucester, Salem and Cumberland Counties. Just like the familiar names of Amish breeders, we have come to know the names and addresses of a few con artists who just can't be caught in the act or charged with fraud and illegal brokering. They have a penchant for buying cheap puppies from the Amish and

Mennonite puppy mills and selling them as their own for up to \$450.00 each, mostly in the way of cash transactions. One man brings the puppies to buyers - who are never allowed to come to his property - for a "delivery" fee of \$15.00. Posing as buyers, we confirmed this via a phone call. We've been told by county officials this man has been selling dogs like this for years and although they are aware of his activities, he must be caught in the act of selling puppies, preferably from his property, before charges can be brought against him. It's frustrating knowing this activity goes on without any oversight or serious concern. The ads continue to run every week or so in the southern Jersey papers. We obtained the paperwork from one complainant who unwittingly bought a puppy from the man in question. The canine registration application (to the American Canine Association, based in PA) showed the name of the breeder as Nathan Myer, our old familiar puppy miller from Lancaster County, PA. The puppy had demodectic mange and another genetic condition; still the buyer hasn't had any luck in recovering her money because the illegal broker, when he was tracked down, refused to respond to her repeated calls or certified letters.

There are others, too, in Monmouth County and elsewhere. Unfortunately, there aren't enough hours in the day to pursue these illegal puppy brokers. Legal action will be taken if only more people will come forward with reports of sick animals purchased without proper interstate health certificates. With the presence of these illegal brokers in our midst, we can only say "caveat emptor" to those who purchase puppies without using good old-fashioned common sense.

HI HO, HI HO, IT'S OFF TO COURT WE GO

So whatever happened to Brady, Mayes, Reingold and Guthrie? First, remember the "burly, squat man" we saw in front of Reingold's Pups Plus store last year? He was Peter Mayes, the same Mayes whom Fred Reingold denied knowing. It was Mayes who bought the puppies in Pennsylvania for resale in Brady and Reingold's stores. We spoke to Nathan Myer's wife who admitted Mayes was one of their regular buyers, and there were several sightings of Mayes as he delivered his live cargo to the rear doors of Brady and Reingold's stores. Mayes and his wife Debbie Bontempo Mayes were also seen inside Puppies-n-Puppies on several occasions, selling puppies when Brady wasn't there.

Puppies-n-Puppies closed in April 2003 and all the animals were put up for adoption. In August 2003, Brady appeared in Dover Township Municipal Court with Debbie Bontempo Mayes, who claimed to be Brady's puppy supplier, and both pleaded guilty to animal cruelty charges. Both Brady and Debbie Mayes were fined, put on probation and ordered by the Court to never engage in the sales of animals in New Jersey.

Cruelty charges (for selling sick animals to Brady's pet store) were dismissed against Peter Mayes in January 2004 after Brady refused to appear in court to testify against him. We believe Mayes has left the state.

Fred Reingold hasn't been seen by pet shop investigators in several years. We heard that he too left the state.

Charles Guthrie has an outstanding bench warrant for his arrest, dating back to 2002. Guthrie was to appear for a hearing to answer charges of animal cruelty (for also selling and harboring sick puppies and not providing veterinary medical treatment to them). He never showed up.

The post office box in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey was used as the address for several entities: Global Kennel Club with Peter Mayes as the registered agent; Fred Reingold's Noah's Pet Care (a housebreaking tool) and Matt Brady's "Find-a-Pet."

Meanwhile, NJCAPSA continues to respond to those who need help in understanding their legal rights in NJ and assistance in filing complaints against pet shops and backyard breeders. If you have a story or problem about a pet shop purchase you'd like to share with us, please contact us at the information provided below.

Libby Williams is the founder and president of NJCAPSA. She is a former cruelty investigator who now devotes most of her time to puppy mill issues. Libby also has a special interest in criminal justice which serves her well in her attempts to unravel the mysteries of the "shady world" of dog dealers. Contact her at: libbywill@embarqmail.com

NJCAPSA is a federally approved 501(C)(3) non-profit organization. For more information on NJCAPSA or to assist us in our mission to help companion animals, contact us or visit our website at: www.njcapsa.org

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