

Is Your Westie Breeder Reputable?

The term ‘puppy mill’ is in the news a lot lately but what does the term really mean? Many of us have a picture in our mind of what we think a puppy mill might be but is it an accurate picture? Recently I attended a training seminar on effective lobbying techniques for pro-animal legislation put on by the Humane Society of the US. Everyone in attendance was ‘pro-pet’ although not everyone in attendance was there because of dog legislation issues. During the Q & A session following the presentation, one person in attendance asked the HS speaker ‘what is a puppy mill’? She went on to say she had bought a puppy from a ‘reputable breeder’, but was appalled at the conditions of the facility her puppy came from. She went on to say how many other breeds this ‘reputable breeder’ dealt in (dozens), the way the dogs were housed (in a barn), and the condition of the puppy she bought (smelly). So how did this lady know the breeder was ‘reputable’? The breeder told her so!

So is the question really what are puppy mills or is it what makes for a reputable breeder? If we better understand what a reputable breeder is, maybe we can better tell who the puppy mill people really are.

First of all, a reputable breeder specializes in one or two breeds of dogs, not dozens! They know the breed and not just how to whelp puppies. Secondly, a reputable breeder is happy to have you come and see their kennel and will proudly show you their dogs and talk ‘Westie’ at length! A reputable breeder will want to know YOU first before they place a puppy in your home. A reputable breeder knows the temperament of the breed and will help the family decide if the breed is right for them. Most reputable breeders require that you fill out an application before they approve of you as a home for one of their babies. Also, the reputable breeder will have you sign a spay/neuter contract before placing a puppy with a family. Does a pet store, an Amish farmer or a back yard breeder do this?

What do you get when you buy from a reputable breeder? A reputable breeder knows the health and genetic background of the dogs they breed. The puppies from a reputable breeder are not just cute, but pre-screened for health issues. A reputable breeder tests for genetic diseases that the AKC parent (Breed Club) recommends. Remember, a puppy being vet-checked is NOT the same thing as being pre-screened!

A reputable breeder won’t offer to meet you at the 7-Eleven to sell you a puppy or hide from you when you have a question or concern about your dog. They will provide a full written health record for the puppy, and your puppy will be well-socialized before you bring him or her home. No breeder dealing with dozens (or more) breeds can possibly socialize all of those puppies!

You will probably have to wait for a puppy from a reputable breeder because they plan and pre-sell their puppies to approved homes. You will need to wait until the puppy is at least 8 weeks old before taking him home. If for some reason you cannot keep the dog, a reputable breeder takes back their dog because they care about what happens after the sale too. A reputable breeder’s puppies are a labor of love for the breed and not just a ‘sale’. These puppies matter to them!

Although most dog owners say they aren’t looking for a show dog for a pet, reputable breeders often have champions in their lineage and pedigrees to back it up. When making a lifetime commitment with a puppy, it makes sense to know the dog comes from good stock and a part of that is knowing how her lineage “conforms to the standard” of the breed. This is done through AKC regulated events such as “conformation” Dog Shows. It takes a lot of money and is a labor of love of the breed to participate in AKC dog shows.

Reputable breeders belong to their local or National AKC breed clubs, and while it’s important to note that not all AKC registered dogs are of good quality or approach the breed standard, red flags should go off for any dog that is not AKC registered. AKC papers do NOT guarantee a healthy dog. However, the AKC does regulate breeders and visits multiple litter kennels. They have rules and some of the larger puppy mills have been

stripped of AKC privileges for noncompliance of these rules, hence the sudden rise of 'designer dogs' that skirt the AKC and have kept several mills in this state doing a brisk business. American Pet Registry (APR) and Continental Kennel Club (CKC) will send you a piece of paper for your dog which is meaningless.

Many of the dogs WWR has available for adoption probably originally came from a puppy mill since they don't have a reputable breeder wanting to take them back, but that does NOT make them less adorable or less valuable to those of us who love them! My first Westie I bought almost 20 years ago came from a pet store in Eau Claire and had been born in Missouri!: home of some of the worst puppy mills in the U.S. I hadn't even heard the term puppy mill until years after I bought Rosie. However, she was the light of my life and started my love of the breed. She died at age 12 from cancer, perhaps due to her 'poor breeding'. It's a shame she didn't live longer, but those 12 years were wonderful with my goofy little 'white devil'!

Currently I reside with 3 delightful Westie girls, the eldest I got from a friend from another state before I even heard of WWR, the 'middle child' comes from a reputable breeder (our own Lynn Sawyer), and the youngest is a WWR dog who according to her paperwork from her original owner, came from a Minnesota puppy mill. I love them all equally and wouldn't trade them for the world!

Why care about puppy mills if the dogs are all equally 'lovable'? The answer is simply these dogs are being bred without regard to their health, their parents' health or without regard to the terrible conditions they are living in. Whether the puppy mill is a large breeding facility, an Amish or Mennonite farm, or someone's backyard under the guise of being a 'hobby breeder', the bottom line for any mill is making money at the expense of the dogs. In the end, often these dogs pay for their beginnings in these mills with health issues that can show up at anytime in their lives. We love our dogs and they in turn love us unconditionally. We should care about where our dogs come from and how to make necessary changes to positively influence the health and well-being of those dogs living in mills. It matters for the health of the breed and the health of our finances to care for the dogs we live with. Being born in a windowless building, a barn, or a shed 'out back', is no way to start a puppy's life, or to live your whole life as a breeding dog. Don't believe the people who do business this way and say that they are the 'reputable breeders'. Call them what they are: puppy millers.

- written by B. Peden for Wisconsin Westie Rescue