

Cyberspace and Mentoring

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The word "mentor" is not a term to be taken lightly. At its best it means a teacher, guide, coach, counselor, trainer, instructor, tutor and guru - all of which imply great knowledge, experience and wisdom - rolled up into one selfless person.

In days of old - six years ago for me - a mentor was usually someone within your nearby circle who took you under their wing and guided you along, trying to save you from repeating the painful mistakes they had made.

But over the past few years the Internet has enabled us to reach so many people all over the world, help them or hurt them deeply, without ever having to make eye contact or even know they exist. As a result of this communications breakthrough, show breeders have a greater obligation than ever to share their ethics and knowledge with people new to the breed.

As in any group, newcomers will be exposed to the best, the worst and everything in between. Responsible owners have a profound obligation to fight even harder to protect our breed in the age of cyberspace puppy mills and auctions. Even the most vile puppy mill can disguise itself with a professionally designed Web site.

We're approaching the next millennium, yet people still don't grasp that pet shops are supplied by puppy mills and other breeders who produce quantity, not quality. But we must remember that not every market breeder is a large kennel like the usual puppy mill.

For example, that nice couple down the street that has a Min Pin and decides to breed without giving any more thought to the outcome than that Aunt Mary wants a puppy or Junior wants to see puppies born or some similar reason. These people-who become pet-shop market breeders when they sell their excess puppies to the shop in the mall, know and care little or nothing about health, diet, training, showing or temperament. In some cases, you wonder whether they even care about the dogs they sell, never mind following up on them generation after generation.

The May issue of the AKC Gazette had a very good article by Jan Mahood that reiterated the King of Toys Standard, characteristics and history. I spend a lot of time talking to people looking for a puppy, answering their questions, letting them come to see my dogs, and referring them to other breeders who may be better able to help them than I am. But at some point I say, "Enough is enough!"

Based on the e-mail I receive, along with chat rooms and breed lists, I realize we must reach these prospective buyers before they buy a dog from the pet store or local puppy mill, because by then it's too late. The next time you hear from a person who buys from these sources, it may be because they want to take their wonderful 16 inch, 20-pound Min Pin and breed it. It doesn't matter to them that their "purebred dog with AKC papers" is nearly twice the size called for in the standard. Somehow, with the help of some owner who knows as little as they do, they will breed their dog.

Min Pin registrations have increased and our breed is well ensconced in the top 20. I'm sure many of the dogs being bred don't fit the standard. Now is the time to be a mentor. We must get into gear and do some serious damage control. My responses to inquiries and e-mail postings have earned me high praise as well as hate mail. Some people consider me compassionate and knowledgeable, while others think I'm an elitist trying to deny them their "constitutional" rights.

When I acquired my first Min Pin, I was lucky enough, by trial and error, to find a good handler whose wife breeds Pugs. I also befriended another person who is active in the terrier ring. Before I bred my first litter, these people had spent many hours with me. They had shared their knowledge and experience and had guided me through the rough spots, encouraging me to make my own decisions while presenting me with the available options.

Every chat we had was a learning experience in some way. Sometimes we laughed hysterically on the phone together. Other times my mentors and friends were there for me when I sobbed uncontrollably over the loss of a newborn puppy and the death of my beloved Chihuahua.

But the most important point they shared with me was ethics. First, don't breed puppies if you are not prepared to keep them as long as necessary and take them back at any point in their lifetime. And second, breed for quality, not quantity.

I hope Maureen Banks and Linda Boney know how much I value them. I know I couldn't have gotten that kind of commitment from a puppy mill or a pet shop clerk, or even a backyard breeder who loves, not wisely, but too well, their dogs.

Responsible people can mentor and share with novices about issues such as spay-neuter contracts; limited registration, screening potential owners, and can say "no" to that owner of a dog that should not be used in a breeding program.