

Pet-Store Puppies

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One of the advantages of doing the breed column for the Miniature Pinscher Club of America is that I have the opportunity to interact with many Min Pin owners and people interested in the breed. I hear from them by phone, letter and e-mail, and I thoroughly enjoy communicating with them all.

However, I also hear some sad stories. Following are two which should be of special interest to those thinking of purchasing a puppy. I hope that some will learn from them.

A woman named Cherie called me to inquire about purchasing a Min Pin, saying a vet had referred her to me. Not long before, she had purchased a Min Pin puppy at a local pet store as the family's Christmas present. Four days and more than \$300 in vet bills later, the puppy died from a bad heart. Her young daughter was devastated, and the family's Christmas was ruined. I cried with Cherie as she told me what they did to try to help this puppy that never played, but just sat quietly. She told me that she should have known better than to buy from a pet store, but she had felt so sorry for the little female in it's cage that she just had to take it home.

After we had talked on the phone several times, Cherie and her daughter Christie came to my house to visit and see what my puppies looked like. She brought with her a photo of her pet-store puppy. It was a frail little black and tan thing, with a very domed head and low ear-set. At only 8 weeks old, it's ears were already cropped, meaning that they had been done when the puppy was even younger. Show breeders typically do not crop a puppy's ears until it weighs at least 4 pounds and is from 12 to 16 weeks of age.

The puppy in the photo was nowhere near that weight or age. She looked nothing like the exuberant, fat young puppies that were clamoring all over Cherie and Christie in my kitchen.

Luckily, Cherie's story had a happy ending. While the adults were distracted with the commotion created by the other pups, Honey, the puppy I had in mind for this family, crawled into the little girl's lap and was quietly cuddling and kissing. Soon this healthy, happy puppy became part of their family.

A few weeks later, I got a call from Diana. She had purchased a Min Pin from the same pet store that Cherie visited because she was completely in love with the breed. The salesperson at the pet store had told her that the Min Pin puppy in the cage had "a little upper-respiratory problem," but that it should clear up with antibiotics. Wrong. It turned out that this puppy actually had a deep-seated problem. It was back and forth between vets from the day that Diana brought it home.

Diana had become very attached to her new puppy by the time it succumbed to pneumonia, four weeks and \$800 later. The puppy's frail system just could not sustain it. The pet store would only credit Diana's charge account for her vet bills up to the \$583 cost of the puppy. The salesperson tried to offer a store credit for the difference.

With Diana's authorization, I phoned the store and politely requested they immediately mail her a check for the cost of the puppy. I explained that I had information that this was not the first Min Pin from that store to die because of ill health, and that I had also gotten reports of problems involving puppies of other breeds from the store. I said that I planned to write about these dead dogs and mentioned the possibility of getting some television cameras into the store. I also pointed out that I had information on the puppy mills these dogs came from and the broker that distributed them.

Diana got almost all of her money back, and now has a lovely Min Pin puppy that is the picture of health. These events were still fresh in my mind last week when I made a rare trip to the shopping mall and found myself right next door to this pet store. I made a quick trip inside to see if there were any Min Pins in the cages. Fortunately, there were not.

However, there was a Cairn Terrier pup, bored and lonely, sitting in its cage and eating its own stool. I told the clerk what the puppy was doing, and she stomped into the back room and opened the cage to remove the stool. The Cairn puppy, thinking it was going to get some attention, ran to the open door and bounced and wiggled. The clerk pushed the puppy roughly across the cage and into the glass, grabbed the stool with a paper towel, and slammed the door in the puppy's face.

A couple standing near me were interested in the Cocker Spaniel puppy in one of the cages. I pleaded with them not to purchase a puppy from that store. I told them about Cherie and Diana's experience's and the financial and emotional losses they had suffered. I said I could give them the phone number of a wonderful local Cocker Spaniel show breeder who would stand behind his or her puppies and guarantee them.

Yet these people looked at me like I had a third eye. They told me that they already had a Cocker Spaniel at home, and that this puppy was cute and they were buying it. I encouraged them to take the pup to the vet immediately, shook my head, and walked out of the store.

The moral of the story is this: You can tell people the horror stories, offer them all the help in the world, make all your resources available to them, and hand them all the educational literature that is available, but you cannot make them learn.

People refuse to believe that puppies in pet store's come from puppy mills. The pet stores say they "get them from breeders" - and, in essence, that is correct. They get them from breeders that literally farm these animals like a cash crop. They do not get them from knowledgeable, responsible show breeders who strive to maintain the integrity of the breed. A person who buys a puppy from such a place is not dealing with someone who will continue to care about the buyer and puppy long after the sale.