

One Clear Moment

Colorado-based group rescues discarded puppy mill dogs



Theresa Strader comforts a Pomeranian seized in a raid of an Arkansas puppy mill.

As a volunteer helping rescue dogs from a Missouri puppy mill that was going out of business in 2007, Theresa Strader walked into a building and found herself choking back tears. The dogs were frantically pacing their cages, wanting attention but retreating fearfully if people got close.

It was the first time she'd seen a puppy mill in person. "The smell, the darkness of it all—it was so overwhelming," recalls Strader, a nurse who lives near Denver.

The group Strader went on to found later that year, National Mill Dog Rescue, was born in that moment, she says. She recalls thinking, "I know what I'm going to devote the rest of my life to, and it's gonna be to put an end to this crap, this hell."

In the next building, where the mill operator—who was auctioning off 561 dogs—kept most of the Italian greyhounds, Strader spotted a terrified dog in the back corner of a cage. Her lower jaw was missing. Strader sensed the dog's silent plea: *Please help me*. Strader told her volunteer group leader that she wasn't going home without No. 251.

Though she'd planned on pulling just a few dogs, Strader wound up loading No. 251, whom she named Lily, and 12 others into her van. On the drive home, she kept thinking that people don't know about the reality of puppy mills. "These are the parents of those little cutiepies you see in the pet store," she says, "and this is not right."

With the help of her husband and a rescue friend, Strader got NMDR off the ground. In six years, the group has rescued about 7,500 puppy mill dogs, animals it adopts out or sends to other rescues around the

country. Though Strader was introduced to the industry by way of a dog auction, nowadays most of her group's rescues are the unwanted castoffs of puppy mills or animals seized in raids. Occasionally the group buys dogs who are considered unmarketable—keeping bids low enough to avoid infusing money into the industry. If it costs a breeder \$20 to enter a dog in an auction, for example, and you never go above a \$20 bid, the breeder makes nothing, Strader says.

In February 2011, NMDR assisted The HSUS when a breeder in Missouri suddenly decided to relinquish 54 dogs. The HSUS didn't have time to deploy its rig, but within 24 hours, Strader sent a driver to pick up the dogs. This February, her group accepted

four malamutes from an HSUS rescue in Montana.

Puppy mill dogs typically arrive at NMDR fearful and plagued by problems that range from rotten teeth to pus-filled uteruses and mammary tumors. But Strader has learned how strong the dogs are.

Lily is a prime example. Despite her many health issues and extreme fear, Lily became a loving and much-loved family pet. She died in May 2008, and her picture now adorns the NMDR sprinter van—inspiring the group with her memory.

— James Hettinger

National Mill Dog Rescue

Peyton, Colorado

► **ROCKY MOUNTAIN KIND:**

While Strader has earned plaudits from the media (including a story last fall in *People*), she's quick to attribute NMDR's success to its 1,400 volunteers, who clocked 27,600 hours last year.



► **THAT'S AMORE:**

Italian greyhounds like Lily have a special place in Strader's heart. She describes them as "crazy, happy,

loving, get-in-your-face, under-your-blankets, follow-you-everywhere" dogs, and she's rescued and placed many over the years.

► **WILL TO LIVE:** Puppy mill dogs go through a lot, but most show amazing spirit, Strader says. "They're forgiving, they're resilient. ... Their ability to move on is astounding."