

Breeder is not a Dirty Word!
In Defense of Breeders
By Karen Priest, Traumhof German Shepherd Dogs

I was late in discovering the word “Breeder” is, to many, a dirty word.

At the vet, where I recently stood in the reception area, awaiting xray with a pregnant dog, a pet owner raised one eyebrow, pursed her lips and stated more than asked “ So, you breed them?” Displeasure was evident on her face.

Elsewhere, I am greeted with similar reactions of distaste, disapproval, disgust. The word BREEDER conjures visions of puppy mills, and miserable dogs always pregnant and isolated in cramped, poor living conditions.

I find myself apologetic and or defensive whenever I reply. These days, I usually answer “Yes,” with my guard up, and try to avoid further discussion.

I worked in a shelter during college. I helped care for those throw away animals that families no longer wanted because they grew too big, shed too much, or simply, because the owner had never bothered to train them. Sometimes these dogs were mixed breeds, but just as often, they were purebred dogs, purchased from pet stores or breeders, both good and bad.

I never wanted to populate the world with dogs. I advocated spay and neuter and to this day I cringe when a well meaning but ignorant mother confides that she hopes to let the family dog have a litter so the kids can experience birth. (My pet puppies are sold with a spay/neuter contract.)

I have always loved German Shepherd Dogs. My Great Uncle bred them for many years, and he was my earliest mentor. A well bred GSD, exemplary of the breed standard, is my version of perfection. As a trainer, I enjoy the ease with which these dogs learn and their joy in problem solving. As a farmer, I find them a perfect partner to help in moving and confining sheep. The particular bloodlines I perpetuate are world renowned for their Herding ability. These days, more folks breed “German line” German Shepherd Dogs for shows and competition or for schutzhund and police work. My dogs are bred with a slightly different purpose, I aim to produce dogs who are beautiful, representative of the breed standard in structure and movement, but first and foremost, highly intelligent, problem solvers with Herding instinct.

I breed several litters a year – some years 2 litters, some years 6 or 7. Each puppy is placed with meticulous care, and all puppies are raised in our home with love, excellent accommodations, and high quality food.

What does it mean to be a breeder? To me, it does not mean mating two dogs and raking in large amounts of cash. Indeed, the opposite can be true; we SPEND a great deal on our animals.

When I owned ONE dog, I made several trips to the vet in a year, for such little emergencies as bee stings, ear infections, or allergies, diarrhea occasionally, or perhaps vomiting, cut paw pads, sprains/lamenesses, myriad other little issues.

With a large number of dogs, I am frequently at the vet several times a week.

I keep track of each dog's vaccination needs, medical history, and any problems. I track heat cycles. I bring my girls for pre breeding exams and cultures.

Each dog must be checked for signs of illness, lameness, ticks, bug bites etc. Each dog must get exercise, training, attention. Each dog likes to have chewies and a nice dog bed. Some prefer my bed or the sofa.

We spend a lot of money to feed our dogs the best quality diet. We home cook part of it.

Our dogs are raised with attention, love and care, as part of our family. Because our dogs are Not kenneled, and have a routine within our household, it is very difficult to find help to care for them in our absence, and my husband and I have had to forego travel and vacations on many occasions.

When one of the girls is due to whelp, I live in the specially built dog nursery with her, I help her through the whelping, I sleep there monitoring the new family. When I return to my own bed days or a week later, I watch the bitch and pups on a baby monitor.

The welfare and happiness of my dogs is paramount. My life revolves around their needs and schedules. While the dogs amount to a large amount of work, I take care of them willingly because this was my choice in lifestyle and I am committed to them. And so, it is with some defensiveness I meet people's preconceived notions of BREEDERS.

To many, the word Breeder Equates with Puppy Mill. Yes, puppy mills exist, and I am as appalled as the next person about their existence. But, I believe that there are many, many breeders who are passionate about their dogs, selective in choosing breeding pairs, and concerned for the welfare of the animals they produce.

Sometimes, a litter is whelped and one or more puppies have some sort of defect or abnormality. What happens to that individual is up to the Breeder's discretion. I always try to do what is right for our animals – even

if it is inconvenient for me. Puppies that another would choose to put to sleep, we have kept, “fixed”, or placed as is, in loving homes.

The ones we kept are not part of our breeding program, they cost us money to keep, and as a business decision, it is crazy to provide so much time and money for their care over many years. We chose not to euthanize these dogs, who have quality of life Now, but harbor a defect that could be problematic later, precludes us from selling them, or might lessen their life expectancy. They will live with us as long as they are enjoying life, and if they begin to have a decline, we will euthanize them before we will allow them to suffer. This is difficult for us, we love these dogs, who might not be with us as long as a normal dog, but we will always do what is in their best interest.

For examples of puppies we “fix” or home, I offer the following: We had a puppy born with a shorter than normal tail. The tail had no ill effect on her health, and her personality was super. She was a beautiful puppy! We homed her at a discount, to a family who didn’t mind her unique tail. We also had a puppy born with long hairs, called dermoids, at the corners of her eyes. These hairs were irritating and might have caused her problems in the future. We spent 1,500 on corrective surgery with a very good prognosis, and kept her until she had healed. We placed her in a home where the family was not concerned that the corners of her eyelids might not be perfect, might droop a little. We made no profit on this puppy, in fact she cost us considerable time and money. But, she now has a happy life and we don’t regret the decision to do what was best for her. A breeder without the means or time to care for her might have euthanized her, or possibly offered her for free to a home willing to undertake the surgery. Would that make the breeder a “bad” person? I don’t think so.

Recently, I was researching a developmental problem in puppies, ectopic ureters. I was worrying that a puppy we bred might have been born with this developmental problem. (She had been diagnosed with a urinary tract infection.) There is a corrective surgery available, but some of the articles I read had estimated the success rate at 30-50%. The surgery to correct this problem is about 4,500. The diagnostics alone, in addition to surgery, approach 3,000. The puppy in question was a round, vivacious, happy puppy and her only problem was a constant wetness and strong urine odor. I had to consider euthanasia as a solution if she indeed had this developmental deformity. I had just spent almost 3,000 helping another of our dogs through pyometra, and the coffers were empty. I didn’t have 7,500 dollars, nor did I like odds of 30-50%. What kind of home would she find, if she was forever to be incontinent? What quality of life would she have with constant UTIs, and Urine Scald? These thoughts were in my mind, as I read about a Wheaton Terrier puppy who had been diagnosed (at a large expense) and was now being offered for free by a breeder. The story was

posted on a Chat Board I found during an internet search for ectopic ureters. A poster on the board wrote “ CAN YOU SAY PUPPY MILL? This poor puppy....”

I bristled.

Why was the breeder assumed to be a mean, uncaring person or worse, a puppy mill, because they offered this puppy ? They were disclosing the problem and hoping someone with the means to help her, would give the puppy a chance.

Incidentally, I read about another Wheaton with this problem – or perhaps the same dog had been remanded to a rescue. This dog was at a rescue. The rescue had done the diagnostics, the surgery and nursed the dog through recovery. The corrective implant surgery was a success but the dog would likely always have mild incontinence. The rescue was hoping to find her a home. Posters hailed the rescue and lambasted the breeder or owner who had surrendered her.

I am not so sure things are black and white enough for us to be casting criticism and blame so freely. I consider myself highly ethical in matters related to my dogs. I can look myself in the mirror, I can sleep at night knowing I give my best efforts to my animals. I don't consider myself a puppy mill or a monster. I love my puppies, each and every one. And, in instances like this one, I will weigh euthanasia as a possible, if unpleasant, solution.

Another group with a wariness of breeders and a hand in bolstering the “Breeders = Bad” consensus are veterinarians. In many cases, the information vets tell their clients is untrue and shocking to me.

Here is a first example:

Many times, prospective clients have come to me with tales of their last dog's fate. Several times I have heard about a dog, usually middle aged, brought in for lameness and diagnosed with Hip dysplasia. The vets have told the family things such as “ The breeder should immediately spay and neuter the parents, they should not be used for breeding after producing a puppy with bad hips.” Or “ I need the name of the breeder and your dog's parents, the dogs should not be bred again,” said as if somehow, the vet is a watch dog agent who can exert some form of influence over the breeder. The breeder is called, dog owner notifies them of the situation with their pet, and most often, finds that the breeder does not/will not spay/neuter the parents. The family now reacts as if they have been personally wronged and posts all over the internet about the bad breeder who bred the two parents after hearing their dog had bad hips.

My reaction? The vet knows quite well that many factors influence development of hip dysplasia. If the parents have certified hips themselves, and a record of producing good hips among other offspring, there is no need to throw the baby out with the bath water! If we reacted in such a way, we would wind up with no dogs to breed. I DO agree that multiple hip and elbow problems from a certain pairing of OFa or “a” normal certified

parents, should mean the parents are not paired again, or should be cut from a program.

Another example:

A puppy goes in for a fecal about 2 weeks after going home. The fecal shows giardia or coccidia or worms. The vet tells the puppy owner that only filthy places and puppy mills produce dogs who test positive for these things. This is another exaggeration. ALL puppies usually do get some form of worm, often passed from their mother. They can also pick it up in soil, in the environment. We routinely worm our litters starting at 2.5 weeks old. And STILL, on occasion, one of the multiple fecals I test over the weeks I raise a litter, comes back positive for a parasite.

Coccidia is present in adult dogs with no ill effect. It can be passed to pups. When a puppy undergoes stress, such as a move to a new home, coccidia multiply and SURPRISE, cause diarrhea and show up on a fecal, where previous fecals were negative.

Giardia can be passed with shoes, shared water, from dogs at shows, or imported dogs (I once brought it home with an import). Some dogs show no ill effect, others get diarrhea. It is very difficult to get rid of once a premises has giardia within a population. However, the presence of giardia does not necessarily equate with a puppy mill or filthy living quarters.

Another example:

Vets often recommend a lesser quality food than the food the breeder is using and recommends. Why? Because the vet carries that food! So many vets also tell clients that their Shepherd puppy is TOO THIN!! In most cases this is not true! I think they are so accustomed to seeing obese labs, they forget what a healthy weight is! Shepherds grow in such a way that they are often lanky and ribby between 4-6 months or up til 10 months. Thin is BETTER than FAT! When vets tell my clients to have their dog gain weight, I cringe. The client goes home, ups the food, and a month later I see the puppy and he looks pregnant!

Do vets come across the worst kind of breeders – the backyard kind, the uneducated kind, the indiscriminate kind? Yes, absolutely. But, many veterinarians are wary of even reputable, diligent breeders simply because we are demanding clients. When a bitch is in heat, we often need to do testing that can't be scheduled ahead of time, and we expect our vet to fit us in. Often, we are aware of new research, new protocols, breed specific problems. We know which medications we want dispensed to successfully treat particular issues, and which ones are safe for pregnant or lactating bitches. We have a definite idea of how we want our animals' care to proceed.

Of course the world is full of people who will breed their pet purposely or accidentally with no thought involved. There are many who will breed any two registered dogs, with no consideration to breed worthiness. There are those who make false claims about their dogs.

There are also many wonderful breeders, both large and small, who strive to produce and raise the best puppies they can.

When consumers educate themselves and refuse to accept puppies raised in dubious situations, the demand for what the backyard breeder produces is diminished. Consumers should do research and come up with a list of “musts” as well as a list of possible areas of compromise when searching for a breeder and ultimately, a puppy.

(Musts might include a Breeder having the puppy’s mother or parents on premises, available to meet, and hip/elbows certifications in place, as well as a healthy environment and high quality living conditions. Compromise might be on gender or color of a puppy, or time frame for adoption.)

All those who call them selves “Breeders” are not what I define as Breeders. What do I mean? If you bought your last dog from a woman who had two dogs she bred a few times, and now she “isn’t in the breeding business anymore”, she probably never was a Breeder – she just Bred her dogs.

To me, a Breeder is someone who has a passion for and a commitment to his/her chosen breed and endeavors to produce a quality animal to carry the best traits possible into future generations. A breeder has an obligation to study bloodlines, know the character of her dogs, be aware of potential health issues, and to have goals in mind for each litter produced. A breeder is committed to the well being of his/her dogs and the puppies produced. A breeder makes every effort to provide support to puppy buyers and to the puppies she produced, so that the puppies are placed in excellent homes ; well cared for and well loved. A breeder’s commitment to her puppies is a lifetime commitment.

Early on a Sunday morning – at 5:00 a.m. - when it seems the rest of the world is still comfortably nestled in bed, I have already been letting puppies out, filling water dishes, preparing food for the newest litter. The babies get hungry quite early, as they have grown accustomed to their mother’s milk being readily available. I have not yet had time to make my coffee, it is cold and dark out as I follow behind our older puppies, hoping they will eliminate OUTSIDE.

I let out all the dogs, fix breakfast, and then I wash all the emptied food bowls. I refill water, and I set up the play yards for the day, so the dogs can go out later in the morning. I clean puppy nurseries, do puppy laundry, and carefully check mother and puppies, weighing and recording observations on each puppy. I dispense any medications needed. At 10 a.m., I feel as if I have already done a day’s work.. but my day has only just begun.

The day’s agenda includes training and exercising dogs, feeding lunch, more cleaning, possibly meeting potential puppy families, teaching classes, show practice, and routine chores that continue through the evening. At night, I am tired but I can not go to bed until 11, after the dog’s last “bathroom break” for the night. I sink down on the sofa, and instantly, I

am flanked by two of our dogs, who nestle in for some snuggle and attention. I love this time with the dogs. Another one appears in front of me, wagging her whole body, and shoves a tug toy in my lap. Two puppies from our latest litter frolic amongst the adults, having some socialization time out of the nursery. Inevitably, they want me to play with them. This is the life of a Breeder. This is the life of a Breeder's dogs. And yet. Breeder is a dirty word.

Author's Note:

I think it is imperative to have a great veterinarian, and I do not mean to imply in this article that "Vet" is a dirty word. Please see our article on Finding A Vet.

We use and highly recommend Slade Veterinary Clinic for our clients & for Breeders in Massachusetts. Specifically, Dr. Migday & Dr. Schmieder are excellent doctors. We consider them an integral part of our Team! As a Breeder, having access to the Reproductive Specialists at Slade is invaluable to me!