

The Little Group That Could

Every Saturday afternoon for more than two years, cars whizzed by a small group of protestors standing along Interstate 35 in Texas. Many of the motorists who regularly drove that route had seen them on that same spot week after week, their signs held high: “Austin Says No to Puppy Mills,” “Honk for No More Puppy Mills,” “Boycott Petland.”

Peaceful demonstrations lead to pet store’s demise

By Lisa Plummer

pet stores, over the Internet and directly to the public. Breeding dogs are often doomed to miserable lives in cages where they are forced to churn out litter after litter, only to be abandoned or killed when they are no longer able to reproduce.

That tragic reality was what kept this small, determined group of animal lovers coming back every week. Their goal: to change Petland’s business model and to educate the public about the connection between pet stores and puppy mills.

In the beginning

When the Austin animal community heard the news that a Petland store was scheduled to open in March 2008, the general feeling was one of shock. “We’ve enjoyed so many years without having a pet store in the city limits,” says Julia Hilder of Spay Austin Coalition. “We couldn’t let them open without a protest.”

As a nonprofit, all-volunteer organization that focuses on sterilizing local feral cat colonies, Spay Austin Coalition was just one of many rescue groups in the city upset by the news. Not willing to let the store open without opposition, the members of Spay Austin Coalition e-mailed everyone they knew in the animal rescue community, and an impromptu protest rally took place. Before the Petland store even opened its doors,



Just behind the protestors was Southpark Meadows Shopping Center, home of a new Petland franchise. The large chain of pet stores has been investigated by many animal welfare organizations and is suspected of selling dogs from puppy mills. Puppy mills are large-scale commercial breeding operations that mass-produce puppies for sale in



50 people were gathered peacefully on public land near the mall's three entrances, armed with picket signs and educational leaflets.

Of the many people who participated in the rally that day, a small group of animal advocates made a special connection, including two members of Spay Austin Coalition, a husband and wife who are animal lovers, an Austin Animal Advisory Committee board member and a Best Friends employee. Inspired by the rally's turnout, like-minded in their passion for the cause and motivated to create as much public awareness as they could, the small group agreed to continue the protests.

"I thought I'd go to the protest, not anticipating any lengthy commitment," says Best Friends Network editor Jennifer Hayes. "It was kind of exciting, and I wanted to make a difference. That one protest turned into another protest, and then all of a sudden we kept doing it every week."

As an Austin firefighter who also serves as vice chair of the Austin Animal Advisory Committee, David Lundstedt was excited to be involved in such an important cause, and also wanted to support his wife, Julia Hilder. "I've never considered myself a big activist person — it's just not my style — but it was nice to get out there with a group of like-minded individuals," he says.

"It didn't matter if there were only two or three of us; we were going to be there every single weekend."

Inspired by their experiences with fostering dogs for the local Maltese rescue, husband-and-wife team Pat and Jeanne O'Neil were enthusiastic about participating in an effort to help bring the horrors of puppy mills to the attention of the public.

"Our group had taken in several dogs that had been given up by a commercial breeder," says Jeanne. "Seeing those dogs really brought home just how terrible and deprived conditions are for the breeding dogs in puppy mills. When I saw that Petland was opening a store in Austin, I knew I had to do something, so I joined the protest."

Staying committed to standing by a busy road every Saturday for four hours is no easy feat, and as the Texas weather began to heat up, participation began to drop, except for the initial core group of six. Eventually, due to family commitments, Lundstedt and Hilder found themselves only able to attend an occasional protest.

"For the most part, week after week, it became the four of us," says Hayes. "We were there every single Saturday, although we did miss the week of Hurricane Ike."

To make it easier on themselves physically, the group reduced their protest time from four to three hours, then to two hours. But they decided to continue to show up every week. "I think that was part of our success," says Sharon Yancey, a Spay Austin Coalition volun-



Peaceful protests close pet stores

By Cathy Scott

Peaceful demonstrations have led to the demise of two upscale pet stores in the Los Angeles area. The downtown Glendale and Canoga Park locations of Just Paws, which sold dogs originating from puppy mills, recently shut their doors for good.

Best Friends' ongoing puppy mill initiatives educate pet store owners and their customers in the Los Angeles area, as well as in Las Vegas and New York, about the benefits of adopting homeless pets rather than buying (or selling) dogs from puppy mills.

On its website, Just Paws advertised that its puppies came from "a network of private USDA-certified breeders," which, translated, means puppy mills.

As part of its puppy mill initiatives, a Best Friends team of volunteers peacefully rallied each week for a year and a half at Just Paws. The closings, according to what mall management and security told Jennifer Krause, marketing specialist for Best Friends' Los Angeles programs, were "business decisions" and "most likely because of decreased profits over the last two years."

Just Paws is one in a growing string of puppy stores that have closed their doors following the series of peaceful demonstrations, organized to encourage store operators to embrace a more humane rescue and adoption model.

"The good news is that three of the largest

chain pet stores in greater Los Angeles have closed in the past 60 days," Krause says. Two Just Paws locations, in Valencia and Arcadia, remain. A Barkworks pet store in Westminster closed six months earlier, and there are six remaining Barkworks stores in the Los Angeles area.

"We're so proud of our volunteers, who have dedicated so much time and energy to educating the public about the irresponsible breeders who supply Just Paws," says Elizabeth Oreck, who manages Best Friends' puppy mill initiatives.

"They never gave up, and it really shows how grassroots commitment and the power of sharing information can bring about profound positive change."

5 things you can do to stop puppy mills

teer and the sixth core group member. "It didn't matter if there were only two or three of us; we were going to be there every single weekend."

And they were. "Sometimes it was hard to get going, knowing that we were going to be standing out in a cold wind or the brutal Texas heat for a couple of hours," says Jeanne O'Neil. "Sometimes I would stand there shivering or sweating and wonder whether or not we were accomplishing anything. Then a car would go by, honking and giving us a big thumbs-up, and I knew the message was getting out there."

The group's main focus was to always stay positive, professional and non-confrontational, regardless of any negative reactions from the public or the store. "On occasion people would drive by and make rude gestures or yell at us, but mostly we got honks of support and friendly waves," Jeanne says. "Sometimes people would park and come over to ask us why we were there. We always loved to see them coming because it was another opportunity to educate someone about the connection between pet stores and puppy mills."

Those face-to-face encounters sometimes paid off immediately. Hayes recalls a family who had come to the mall to purchase a Chihuahua puppy at Petland. After Hayes shared information with them about Petland and its connection to puppy mills, the family decided to head to the city's animal shelter to adopt a dog.

When the protestors felt their resolve slipping, their strong friendships and mutual encouragement helped see them through, remembers Yancey. "It's like those stories you hear about people in the military, when they're asked how they went on and they say [they did it] for their fellow soldiers," says Yancey. "That's how it was with us. I didn't want to let these people down. I had to pull my weight and I had to be there."

For Jeanne O'Neil, Hilder and Yancey, joining a Humane Society of the United States puppy mill bust in North Texas was just the experience they needed to revive their fighting spirit. "We saw dogs that had huge tumors almost half the size of a little dog and mothers that should have stopped breeding years ago and had sick little puppies in the cages with them that looked like they were barely going to make it," says Hilder. "You see that in real life and there's no way you can't take it back to I-35 and say, 'Okay, we have to continue to do something about this.'"

Meanwhile, David Lundstedt was working behind the scenes to help create animal-friendly legislation in Austin. Although he had helped implement a citywide Pet Trader ordinance that imposed a \$50 fee on any person or business selling more than

Day of reckoning

15 intact animals per year, the ordinance languished and later became unenforceable. Frustrated but undeterred, Lundstedt searched for more effective legislation. When he heard about the retail sales ban of puppies and kittens that had passed in West Hollywood, California, in March 2010, Lundstedt realized he'd hit pay dirt.

"I downloaded the ordinance from West Hollywood, presented it at the Austin Animal Advisory Committee meeting, told them the basic idea, and we voted to send it to the city council," he says. "We approved the idea, and the council passed the resolution to do it, so once it's reviewed by the legal department, we'll get it back to council as soon as possible for final approval. But the resolution was the main thing. It's pretty much a done deal."

The ordinance appeared to be the final straw for Petland. In early July, the protesters observed a large banner in front of the store advertising 50 percent off; they had heard rumors that the store was closing. "We suspected that things weren't going well for them," says Hayes.

"One of our protesters called the store, and they said they were closing, then a couple of our people visited the store and verified that it was true. I was thrilled but shocked, as our goal was always to educate people and to get the store to go humane, not to shut it down."

Everyone in the group had bittersweet emotions about the store's closure, because they all had hoped Petland's owners would eventually embrace a humane model by adopting out shelter and rescued pets rather than selling puppies. Instead, the store shut its doors on July 18, 2010.

"They told the media they were closing because the city council had passed this ordinance, which wasn't really true because we hadn't passed it yet," says Lundstedt. "I suspect it was the combination of the economy, the protests and just the fact that Austin is a different kind of city than they're used to."

It became obvious that the community had been watching the developments at Petland: The *Austin Chronicle* awarded the protestors the 2010 Best Grassroots Activists Award in its annual Best of Austin readers' poll.

"I would encourage anyone whose heart is touched by the plight of puppy mill dogs to find like-minded people in their community and to look for opportunities to spread awareness," says Jeanne O'Neil. "We can't wait for laws to change or for someone else to do something. Do something, even a small something, and don't underestimate the impact your actions can have." 🐾

Lisa Plummer is a freelance writer based out of Las Vegas.