

# Golden Opportunity

As governments restrict sales of commercially bred puppies, a cottage industry of mom-and-pop dog breeders has emerged to meet the demand.

By Amy Martinez

**Six years ago**, Brandie delaPaz and her husband, Matt, a Marine infantryman then stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C., paid \$1,500 to a breeder for their first golden retriever, an 8-week-old female named Sophie.

The delaPazes, who have four young children, found Sophie to be an ideal family pet and decided to breed her once she was old enough because “we wanted another dog just like Sophie,” says Brandie delaPaz, a stay-at-home mom.

She went online to research how to breed dogs and became overwhelmed by how much there was to know, she says. She enrolled in a program for veterinary assistants at her local community college and eventually bred Sophie with a golden retriever owned by another breeder.

After a two-month pregnancy, Sophie gave birth at home to eight puppies. The family kept a puppy for themselves, gave three to neighbors and sold the rest for \$300 to \$400 each.

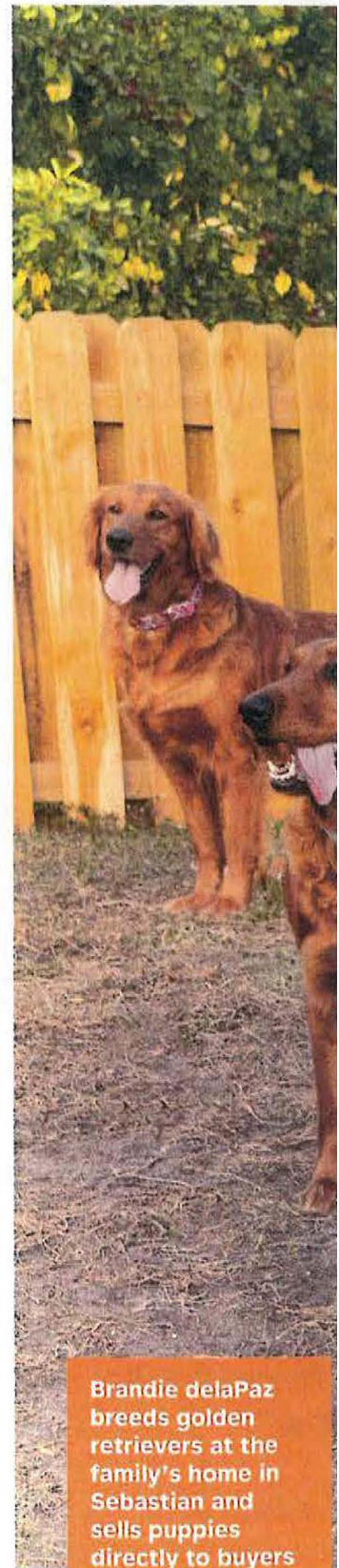
“We had no idea what we were doing,” Brandie says, laughing. “We look back

and say, ‘dang, we were so inexperienced.’ It’s like any small business — you learn.”

Brandie and Matt delaPaz got more serious about breeding, acquired a golden retriever stud and raised two more female dogs. In late 2016, Matt retired from the Marines after 15 years of service. The next year, the family moved to Sebastian in Indian River County, where they converted their dining room into a puppy room.

The delaPazes now breed two female dogs — Meli and Daisy — once a year with the male, Charming. Sophie, their original golden retriever, will retire from breeding later this year. Brandie, who runs the business, registers the puppies as purebred with the American Kennel Club, markets online through AKC’s website and usually has a waiting list. (She already has deposits for the next litter in August.)

A typical litter numbers eight puppies, each priced at \$2,000. The delaPazes say they generate around \$30,000 a year from two litters of puppies and spend between \$12,000 to \$15,000 on the dogs’



Brandie delaPaz breeds golden retrievers at the family’s home in Sebastian and sells puppies directly to buyers for \$2,000 each.



photo: Norma Lopez Molina



## Pet Count

**38:** Number of USDA-licensed commercial dog breeders statewide

**50:** Number of stores that sell dogs in Florida

**\$133.8 million:** Annual pet sales statewide, including dogs, cats, birds, etc.

**28,459:** Number of dogs newly registered with the AKC in Florida in 2017

**1 million:** Estimated number of dogs euthanized each year in the U.S.

**2 million:** Estimated number of dogs adopted at rescue shelters each year in the U.S.

Sources: Humane Society, Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council and American Kennel Club

upkeep, including veterinary care and food. "This is my way to make some extra income for our family," Brandie says.

Indeed, Craigslist and the classified sections of newspapers are full of ads by people who've turned dog breeding into a cottage industry. On a recent weekday, the *Tampa Bay Times'* classified section included more than 40 ads from breeders with names like FurMySunshine.

com and phone numbers, selling everything from basset hounds for \$1,100 to Cavalier King Charles spaniels for \$2,500. A search for "puppies in Florida" on AKC's online marketplace turns up about 770 results.

### 'Abysmal' regulations

No government agency regulates small breeding operations in Florida,

making it impossible to know exactly how many mom-and-pop breeders there are statewide. In 2017, more than 28,000 dogs were registered with the AKC in Florida, but that does not include popular cross-breeds such as the labradoodle or cockapoo. It also doesn't distinguish between commercially bred dogs and those bred in homes. The AKC says it has no way to estimate the num-

## Doggy Do's and Don'ts

▶ The U.S. Department of Agriculture regulates commercial breeders who have at least five breeding female dogs and sell indirectly to buyers via pet stores or websites.

▶ Breeders can choose to register their litters with the American Kennel Club (AKC), a New York-based non-profit that maintains a national registry of purebred dogs. Although the AKC does not have regulatory authority, it inspects breeders periodically and can yank AKC privileges, including the ability to market dogs as purebred or compete in dog shows, if it finds major problems with a kennel.

▶ The Humane Society urges people to adopt from a rescue shelter, but for those who decide to buy from a breeder, it has two main tips:

1. Talk to a veterinarian or trusted friend, contact a local kennel club or attend a professional dog show to learn where to find responsible breeders.

2. Visit a breeder's facility before buying a puppy. See



where the puppy was born and raised and meet the pup's mother. "It's a red flag if they refuse to show you the mother dog or if they refuse to let you come to their home and insist on meeting at a gas station parking lot instead," says John Goodwin, senior director of the Stop Puppy Mills Campaign for the Humane Society of the United States.



Brandie delaPaz's puppies are registered as purebred with the American Kennel Club. DelaPaz markets online through AKC's website and usually has a waiting list.

ber of mom-and-pop breeders in Florida.

One reason for the growth in mom-and-pop breeding operations is that pet stores and websites that sell dogs supplied by large, commercial breeders are coming under increased pressure from animal activists. The U.S. Department of Agriculture requires breeders bigger than a mom and pop to be licensed and inspected, but a USDA license is no guarantee that a breeder is humane or honest, says John Goodwin, senior director of the Humane Society's Stop Puppy Mills Campaign. "USDA regulations are abysmal," he says. A breeding dog might spend most of its life in "a cage only six inches longer than its body, and that's legal," he says.

During the past decade, dozens of Florida cities, including Fort Lauderdale, Miami Beach and St. Petersburg, have moved to close down puppy mills by banning pet stores from selling dogs obtained from commercial breeders. Five Florida counties also have banned or curtailed retail dog sales ("A Leash on Sales," page 79).

Some now hope to pass a statewide ban on sales of dogs from commercial breeders. In 2017, California became the first state to limit pet store sales of dogs and cats to shelter or rescue animals only.

The legislation doesn't ban private dog sales, however, meaning people can still buy canine pets directly from small, home-based breeders like the delaPazes.

By all appearances, the delaPazes are caring, responsible breeders. They talk openly about their breeding practices and treat their dogs as pets — the dogs sleep inside, eat homemade food and have their run of a large fenced-in backyard, Brandie says. Because she makes a side income from breeding, she's registered as a business with the state.

She says she screens buyers to make sure they're prepared for a new dog, both financially and emotionally. Buyers must fill out an application form that asks about the type of place they live in, household size, allergies, other pets, work schedules and plans for caring for a new puppy. "I turn down people all the time," she says.

She has her buyers sign a contract agreeing to return a dog to her if they become unable to care for it. She says she stays in contact with each buyer and withholds breeding rights so that the dogs can't be used for breeding, while buyers could breed without her knowing, they wouldn't have the papers to register a litter with AKC. She says the problem with some mom-and-pop breeders is that

they don't know what they're doing.

"We once talked to a breeder who was like 'Yeah, we just had a litter. Two puppies died, and we don't know why.' Come to find out, they were freezing" from being left out in the cold, she says. "Thankfully, we've never had a puppy pass on us."

The delaPazes say they've learned to recognize when a mother dog is about to go into labor and have conquered their squeamishness about birthing. "We have the puppies in our bathroom because it's a small area, it's quiet and we can dim the lights," Brandie says. "We stay there until the last puppy is out." The eight-week period after a litter is born (but before the puppies go home with their new families) is the most labor-intensive, she says. She potty-trains the puppies, teaches them basic obedience and gets them vaccinated, micro-chipped and checked out by a veterinarian.

She says dog breeding allows her to supplement the family's income and still be available for her children while Matt studies for a bachelor's degree at Indian River State College. He has post-traumatic stress disorder from multiple tours of combat duty overseas, and they live primarily off his military pension and VA disability benefits.

## Craigslist and newspapers are full of ads selling everything from basset hounds for \$1,100 to Cavalier King Charles spaniels for \$2,500.

Aside from the money, she believes that having golden retrievers around Matt helps with his PTSD. "This has been very therapeutic for him," she says. "He's like, 'How much more can I ask for? I'm literally surrounded by happiness.'"

### Dog lemon law

Other breeders who might be operating ethically are less comfortable talking



### Puppy Mills

The Humane Society defines a puppy mill as an "inhumane high-volume dog-breeding facility that churns out puppies for profit, ignoring the needs of the pups and their mothers." The organization estimates that about 10,000 puppy mills are in operation nationwide, mostly in the Midwest, and that about 3,000 of those are USDA-licensed. Although Florida has relatively few commercial breeding operations, the state's large consumer market makes it a key battleground between animal activists and pet retailers.

Florida requires dogs that come from out-of-state breeders to have a certificate of veterinary inspection on file with the state, which keeps those records for a year.

about their operations, however. FLORIDA TREND tried to contact more than a dozen breeders statewide over a two-month period and heard back from only one other breeder besides the delaPazes. A Gainesville-area breeder who goes by the name City Slickers Ranch said she was too busy to talk. "I am in the middle of dog show season, and I am training a couple of herding dogs for a dressage trainer," she said in an email. "During dog show season and training season, I have not five minutes to myself."

When a breeder advertises a dog as purebred, one way for buyers to know what they're getting is to check if the dog is AKC-registered. The AKC considers a dog purebred if both its parents are of the same breed and its owner has the papers to prove it. The cost to register a purebred litter is \$25, plus \$2 a puppy.

Websites such as Chewy.com sell at-home DNA dog test kits for about \$70 to help identify a pet's breed. If, for example, a "purebred" Maltese turns out to be half-chihuahua, the buyer could complain to the Florida Department of Agriculture, which enforces the state's pet lemon law. Most pet lemon law complaints have to do with the health of a new pet, but the law also covers disputes over a dog's breed.

In 2018, the state received 71 complaints from pet buyers against dog breeders and sellers.

Under state law, any seller, including the delaPazes, must have a dog checked out by a veterinarian within a month before the sale. If the buyer's vet then determines the dog is sickly, the buyer may return the dog for a refund, exchange it for a new dog or get reimbursed for the vet bill. Buyers have up to a year to make a claim for a congenital defect or misrepresentation of breed.

When it comes to questions about the conditions in which dogs are bred, the USDA is the only government agen-



### Popular Breeds

Florida's Most Popular Dog Breeds (2017)

1. German shepherds
2. Labrador retrievers
3. French bulldogs
4. Golden retrievers
5. Bulldogs
6. Poodles
7. Rottweilers
8. Yorkshire terriers
9. Dachshunds
10. Boxers

Note: Based on the number of dogs registered with the American Kennel Club  
Source: American Kennel Club

cy with regulatory authority over the state's commercial-size kennels. (Florida is among 16 states that do not regulate commercial breeders within their borders.)

While recent efforts to ban retail dog sales in Florida aren't aimed at small-scale breeders like the delaPazes, they say they're wary of the new regulations. "Eventually, they're just going to put all those laws and regulations on us," Brandie says. If that happens, she adds, they'll move their business to North Carolina, where they also own a home.

## A Leash on Sales

During the past decade, about 60 cities and counties statewide have banned or curtailed retail dog sales in an effort to reduce the market for commercial breeding and encourage more people to adopt pets.

"Our preference would be that pet shops only sell pets that come from rescue organizations and animal shelters," says Ralph DeMeo, a shareholder in Baker Donelson's Tallahassee office and chair emeritus of the Florida Bar animal law section. "Most dogs currently sold at pet shops come from puppy mills."

Last year, DeMeo, whose clients include the Animal Legal Defense Fund, helped defeat proposed state legislation that would have barred local governments from prohibiting the sale of commercially bred dogs. He says animal welfare is a popular cause in Florida, pointing to the recent passage of Amendment 13, which bans greyhound racing statewide. Florida voters approved the ballot measure 69% to 31%.

"People are starting to

realize we don't need puppy mills and we don't need pet shops," DeMeo says.

But Mike Bober, president and CEO of the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, a Washington, D.C.-based trade group, says pet shops account for a small percentage — about 4% to 7% — of dogs that end up in people's homes each year. Many more dogs — about a third — get adopted at shelters, he says. In addition to pet shops, commercial breeders sell online or directly to buyers via flea markets and classified ads.

"Pet stores are not the main channel through which breeders provide dogs to people," he says. "These local ordinances are well-intentioned but misguided."

Bober argues that pet shops provide an option for people looking for highly desirable dogs, such as small, hypoallergenic breeds. "We think the health benefits of the human-animal bond are so important that anyone who wants to bring an animal into their life and care for it should have that opportunity," he says.



About 60 Florida cities and counties have passed laws banning dog sales at pet stores.

### County Restrictions

► **Sarasota County:** Pet stores may not sell dogs and cats obtained from breeders unless the animals are sold from the premises on which they were bred or reared.

► **Palm Beach and Hillsborough counties:** New pet stores may not sell commercially bred dogs, but existing stores may continue to sell from USDA-approved breeders.


► **Seminole County:** Pet stores may offer only dogs and cats that come from animal shelters or rescue organizations.

► **Lake County:** Dogs and cats may not be sold, traded or auctioned at pet shops, yard sales or flea markets. Retailers such as PetSmart and Petco, which do not sell dogs and cats, may continue to partner with rescue shelters to adopt out pets.



## Big Business

Pet industry sales in the U.S. have increased by 68% over the past decade. In 2007, total industry sales were \$41 billion. By 2017, Americans were spending \$69 billion on their pets, including ...

- \$29 billion for pet food
- \$23 billion for veterinary care and other services
- \$15 billion for pet supplies
- \$2 billion for the pets themselves 

Source: American Pet Products Association