



the Rescue

A handful of Birminghamians stepped in to stop the cruelty of an Alabama puppy mill.

Written by Jan Walsh
Photography by Crys Carnes

I fell in love with the Cavalier King Charles spaniel breed of dogs in 1999. Shopping in an antique store in Fairhope, Alabama, two Cavalier “shop dogs” greeted me. I had never seen such beautiful dogs. Interest quickly turned into obsession, as I began to research these small spaniels, classed as a toy dog by the Kennel Club and the American Kennel Club. In 2000, my family adopted Monte, a Cavalier puppy. In 2012, we adopted two more Cavaliers, Hallee and Wyckie.

The Cavalier King Charles spaniel is a 20th-century recreation of the legendary spaniel so beloved by King Charles II of England in the 17th century. Ever present in his life, the King Charles spaniel was often painted in portraits with the king. In the early part of the 19th century, the breed’s appearance was altered by breeding King Charles spaniels with pug breeds to reduce the length and size of the snout, which was fashionable at the time. During the first half of the 20th century—due in great part to American Roswell Eldridge—a breeding movement was initiated to breed dogs of the “old type” as seen in portraits of King Charles II, with longer and larger snouts and flat skulls.

Afterward, World War II almost eliminated this movement, leaving only six dogs from which all Cavalier King Charles spaniels have descended. The new breed of Cavalier King Charles spaniels was first recognized by the Kennel Club in 1945 as a tribute to the Cavaliers who defended the throne of Charles I during the 17th century English Revolution. The breed became popularized in America after President Reagan gave his wife, Nancy, a Cavalier named Rex as a Christmas gift in 1985.

There are four color coats: Blenheim, tricolor (black, white, tan), black and tan, and ruby. As a breed, Cavalier King Charles spaniels are very affectionate, playful, and patient. They need human interaction, adapt easily, are good with children and other dogs (especially other Cavaliers), and are extremely

eager to please.

In 2013, my friend Ashley Rhea invited me to join a private Facebook group, where I met rescue volunteers Crys Carnes, Angie Ingram, Lisa Thompson, and Brittney Wilk. The Facebook page, for owners of Cavaliers who live in the Birmingham area, provides a forum for members to ask and share advice, support, and awareness and to post pictures of our dogs. “The social group is not only for the humans, but also for the Cavaliers,” Wilk says. Individually and collectively, many group members also respond to the needs of Cavaliers that are in need of a forever home by fostering, rescuing, and adopting them. And offline, social outings serve as fundraisers for local Cavalier rescue efforts.

In late 2013, 12 Cavaliers were taken into rescue from an anonymous source; all of the pups had extremely serious and similar health problems. “We knew they had to all be coming from the same place,” Ingram says. After much investigative work online and offline, suspicions became reality. On a sweltering hot July day in 2014, Ingram drove to rural Lineville, Alabama, where she suspected the dogs were located. “This commercial breeding facility, owned by Terri Taylor Easterbrooks, had a single wide trailer at the side of the property. And through the windows I could see Cavaliers in wire crates, stacked several crates high,” Ingram remembers. The trailer had very small windows and no apparent ventilation, nor air conditioning units in the windows. “At a distance, I was

able to see, hear, and smell the conditions in which the dogs were being kept. From 25 feet away, the ammonia from urine was so overpowering that I had to cover my face.”

Wilk and Thompson made numerous attempts to contact the owner, offering assistance to help her and the dogs. “As rescue representatives, we offered to take in any of the dogs,” Wilk says. “We also had many people offering large lump sums to buy some of the breeding stock, in efforts to help her ‘downsize.’ She refused any offers of help.” Ingram contacted the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) for guidance. As instructed, she filed a formal complaint with the Clay County Sheriff’s Department, along with photographs. According to the Sheriff’s Dept. investigation, there were 161 dogs on the property, with 127 of them living inside the single-wide trailer. The investigation also found two dogs in need of emergency veterinary care. A veterinarian attending the investigation documented that 60 to 70 percent of the dogs had conjunctivitis. “While HSUS was more than willing to assist, their help was never accepted by the local authorities,” Ingram says. “The county never filed charges, explaining that the dogs had adequate food, water, and shelter.”

When Ingram posted the pictures on the group’s Facebook page, members were outraged. Many of us could not sleep all night for weeks. We began posting pleas to the owner on her business Facebook page. I invited David Martin, a friend, Tuscaloosa attorney, and owner of a Cavalier named Geoffrey to join the group and then discovered Geoffrey also came from this breeder. He assisted Ingram, a Birmingham attorney, who was already providing free legal help and guidance in the attempted rescue. The group rallied together, offering to do whatever it took to first rescue these dogs and afterward to work toward strengthening the animal cruelty law in Alabama.

In October 2014, Carnes traveled to the Lineville neighborhood. She took numerous zoomed photos that showed the dogs’ eyes were crusted over and cloudy. Carnes filed a new complaint. The Sheriff’s Dept. went back to the property but no action was taken. Ingram asked him about the dogs with eye problems. “The sheriff told me that there weren’t that many, and they were being



The condition of the dogs and their living arrangements was heartbreaking.



treated,” Ingram recalls. There were also environmental concerns due to reports by surrounding neighbors of the facility’s practices of burning feces and washing urine from the cages with bleach that was running into the creek and their drinking water.

As a group, we continued the fight to shut down this operation with legal, environmental, and social pressure. Eventually the owner contacted the USDA to auction the dogs rather than have them rescued. As a result, the Cavaliers were then transported to the Wheaton, Missouri, auction house, where they were held in cages for two weeks until the auction in November 2014. Knowing that other commercial breeders would buy the dogs in auction, Wilk established a GoFundMe campaign for our group and others to purchase as many dogs as possible. Rescue coordinators, Thompson, and Wilk worked day and night to form a rescue plan that included coordinating the transportation of the dogs, vetting, foster home placements, dispersal to other areas, and collecting medical and other supplies needed after the auction. The total number of dogs that could be rescued was unknown, so accommodations for a maximum of approximately 80 dogs were made. Caldwell Mill Animal Clinic and cardiologist Dr. Ingrid Straeter agreed to vet as many as 80 dogs on a Sunday morning at 6 a.m. when the dogs would arrive back in Birmingham. Individual group members shared pictures of the dogs asking for donations in their own personal networks. The rescue quickly went viral. With

an initial goal of \$50,000, the GoFundMe campaign raised approximately \$150,000 prior to the auction.

Carnes, Ingram, and Ingram’s daughter, Kara, represented the group at the auction. During the auction, Ingram was the designated bidder. Kara handled the financial situation during the auction, crunching the numbers quickly. Carnes kept track of the auction list coordinated with other rescue groups—Lucky Star Cavalier Rescue, Treasured Pals Small Spaniel Rescue, and American Cavalier King Charles Spaniel Club Rescue Trust—so that Ingram didn’t bid against them. Members watched the posts from the auction and saw from the start that we would run out of money because the dogs were going for more than expected. So we used PayPal to send more funds. By the time the bidding was over, approximately \$250,000 was raised, and no Cavalier was left behind. “I am especially thankful for that last push for donations because our senior and sick boys like Buster, Sedeki Yates, and Rocky would not be with us and getting the love and care they need now without those last funds,” Wilk says. People from around the world donated to support the cause, but the people of Birmingham were at the core of the efforts from the very beginning. “Birmingham’s generosity is truly unprecedented, and we believe that because of their overwhelming local support the rescue efforts succeeded,” Wilk continues. “It’s not just the financial support, but all the volunteer efforts and donations we received in support of this rescue

effort.”

The united forces of the four rescue groups rescued all 98 dogs (96 Cavaliers and two Cocker), with two purchased directly by individuals who had coordinated with the rescue. Of these 98, the Birmingham group purchased and saved 46 Cavaliers, bringing 34 back to Birmingham for vetting and temporary foster care before many were dispersed elsewhere around the country for full-term foster placement and adoption. The Greater Birmingham Humane Society provided TARA, a transport vehicle, and volunteers to bring the dogs to Birmingham. Birmingham group member Carolyn Ray, along with her daughters Courtney Ray Nichols and Amanda Ray, were also in Wheaton and assisted GBHS in loading the dogs onto TARA and coordinated with the other rescue teams, who arrived from other states to transport dogs that did not come back to Birmingham. Birmingham’s Whole Dog Market, Generation Dog, and Hollywood Feed donated food and supplies. And group members donated many items, including towels for each dog’s initial bath and vetting.

The dogs arrived in very bad condition, medically and emotionally. An alarming majority of the dogs had worms and parasites, ear infections, severe dental disease, flea infestation, hernias, skin infections, eye ulcers, dehydration, and mitral valve prolapse. Many have permanent visual impairments as a result of keratoconjunctivitis being neglected. Most of the dogs had to undergo extensive tooth extractions due to severe dental

disease. Two of the dogs have had complex corrective patella surgery and are currently in rehabilitation, one will have to undergo hip surgery, and a few others have luxating patellas that may need future surgery. Emotionally, the dogs were extremely stressed from all they had been through. Most of the dogs refused food and water and hid in their crates. “They were terrified of our hands and from being handled in general, even in the gentlest way,” Wilk describes. “They would completely ‘pancake’ to the floor rigid and frozen if a hand approached them.” The dogs have since learned to eat and drink from bowls, walk up and down stairs, walk on leashes, and to be less fearful of humans.

Alabama does not have any laws to regulate large-scale commercial breeders. Local authorities can only pursue charges under Alabama’s animal cruelty statute. Section 13A-11-240 defines cruelty as “[e]very act, omission, or neglect, including abandonment, where unnecessary or unjustifiable pain or suffering, including abandonment, is caused or where unnecessary pain or suffering is allowed to continue.” As an attorney, Ingram believes that there should be stronger laws that regulate and prohibit puppy mills from flourishing in Alabama.

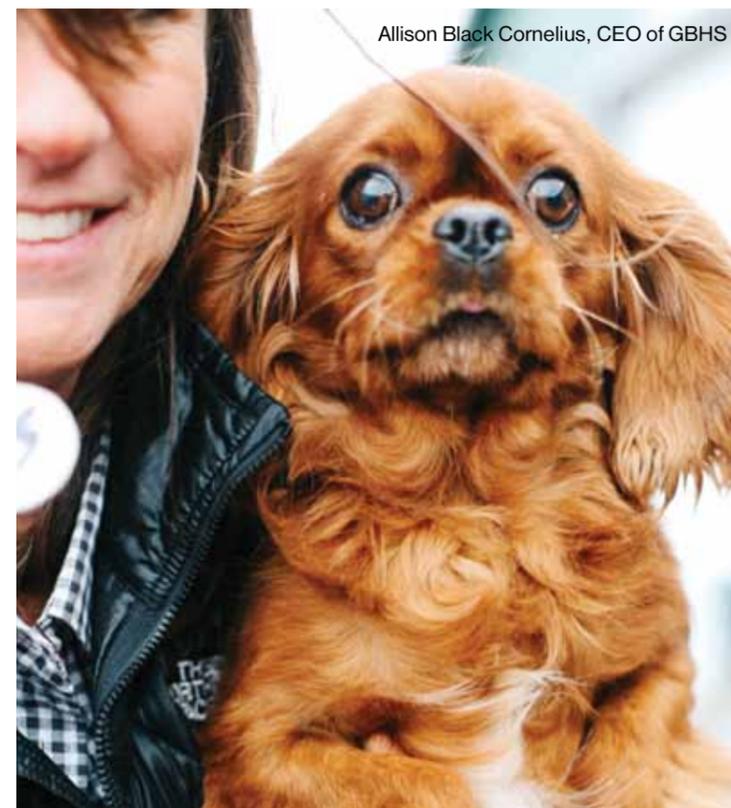
The problem is also more rampant than the general public is aware. Alabama has

many rural areas where these large, commercial breeders are allowed to thrive. And just because a commercial breeder surrenders animals to auction does not mean the same breeder has gone out of business. Many begin selling online under a different business name. It is not wise to buy a puppy online without doing extensive research on the breeder, researching the breeding stock’s health history, and visiting the property. In January 2015, Wilk and Thompson founded Cavalier Rescue of Alabama with Ingram leading a division of the organization focused on anti-puppy-mill initiatives. Cavalier Rescue of Alabama and Alabama Puppy Mill Project is currently working with HSUS to help promote legislation that will put into place laws to prevent this from happening in the future. “This particular breeder is still selling puppies, so if you



Left to Right: Angie Ingram, Kara Ingram, Crys Carnes, Donna Berggren (from Charlestown, Indiana), and Paula Sifford (from Manchester, Tennessee)

are interested in a Cavalier, please contact Cavalier Rescue of Alabama and Alabama Puppy Mill Project to assist you in finding a reputable breeder or a perfect match rescued Cavalier,” Wilk suggests. And even if the women are successful in putting new legislation in place, there will still be the same issue of “enforcement” that will have to be addressed. Once the legislation is introduced, the general public can help by contacting their local legislators and letting them know that we do not want Alabama to continue to be a dumping place for puppy mills and that we will actively do everything to keep them from flourishing in our state.



Allison Black Cornelius, CEO of GBHS



Courtney Ray Nichols and Carolyn Ray