

Jacqueline Piñol 0:06

The Canine Condition. Come. Sit. Stay. Welcome to The Canine Condition podcast. My name is Jacqueline Piñol. I am an actor, documentary filmmaker, and animal rescue advocate. The Canine Condition podcast is a platform to bring awareness to dog adoption, and to provide all dog lovers and pet owners with information and resources on how to raise a healthy and well balanced dog. If you are thinking about getting your first dog, or just want to know where and how you can help a dog in need, this is also a place for you.

Talk less, listen more. I remind myself of that from time to time. As an advocate for animal rescue, it's not always about the talking. Being an informed and knowledgeable voice on the topic is necessary in order to fight for the cause responsibly. For this episode, I have a feeling it's going to be a lot about the listening. My guest today is Mindi Callison, founder of the national nonprofit organization, Bailing Out Benji, based in Iowa. Mindi founded the organization at 21 years of age after falling victim to the puppy mill industry by way of a local pet store. Bailing Out Benji and its research team have been instrumental in passing humane ordinances across the United States. They have been one of the driving forces behind exposing the national puppy laundering scheme that is currently happening in numerous states across this country. Welcome to the podcast, Mindi.

Mindi Callison 1:42

Thank you so much for having me.

Jacqueline Piñol 1:44

Yes, we're very excited. I'm very excited. I say we because I think of The Canine Condition as a whole. But I know I'm personally very excited to have you and introduce you to our listening audience. Because Bailing Out Benji is an amazing foundation, who is going to bring us and has already made so much change in the world of the Canine Condition. So I want to hear all about it.

Mindi Callison 2:08

I'm really excited to tell you.

Jacqueline Piñol 2:10

Let's start with this. I mean, you're young, you're this young, beautiful, vibrant, go getter girl. And I want to know, what drives you to pursue this deeply passionate mission with Bailing Out Benji, and who is Benji?

Mindi Callison 2:24

So right now, what drives me is my own dogs. My husband and I personally rescue black labs, and many of them have come from puppy mills or breeding facilities. And so right now they're what get me out of bed every morning to continue my mission. But really, I started Bailing Out Benji when I was 21. Because when I was in college, I had never heard of puppy mills, like many of your listeners, like many of the public, I do not like to be sad. And when you're watching TV and you see the commercials, you know which ones I'm talking about. They're so sad and they

tug on your heartstrings, and the answer that you're given in those commercials is to donate, right there's never a here's what you can do. And so growing up, I had a really tumultuous childhood. But I didn't like to be even more sad than I already was. So I would turn the station, I had never even heard the term puppy mill. And so when I was a homesick college student, I walked into a pet store and I was just there to pet the puppies. I lived off campus, I lived in an apartment, had no business owning a puppy. I was very busy and the pet store convinced me to buy one. Because I was broke. I was a young kid, they gave me a credit card with a 30% interest rate. I had to buy the \$1500 Siberian Husky which should not live in apartment complexes. You know, I had to buy the toys and the treats and everything. And they didn't tell me where my dog was born. It wasn't until a news story about that pet store, about my dog's breeder hit the news. And immediately I was struck with "my dog could be sick", "I could be stuck with vet bills". At that time being 19 I couldn't see past my own toes. I didn't realize that my dog's parents and grandparents were still being bred back at that puppy mill. And so when I left college, I became a teacher. I'm currently in Ames, Iowa. And when I relocated there, there was a pet store that was selling puppies. And they all hit me again. And I went in and asked "Where did you get the puppies from?", and they were really honest at the time. This would have been right around 2011, you weren't talking about puppy mills. And so they told me, I learned what they were doing. And right there. I was like, Iowa is the worst state in the nation behind Missouri. We have no laws. We have lots of puppy mills, what can I do? And so I decided to start our then blog Bailing Out Benji, and now we're a national nonprofit.

Jacqueline Piñol 4:53

Yes. Congratulations on that. I think it's wonderful that you've pursued that avenue.

Mindi Callison 4:58

Yeah, it came again out of necessity. I was in a documentary. And when that documentary, it's called, Dog By Dog.

Jacqueline Piñol 5:05

I saw you in that. And you know, that is how I found out about Bailing Out Benji for the first time.

Mindi Callison 5:10

Well, I'm so glad. Yeah, I'm glad to hear that it had screenings all over the world, and then it hit Netflix. And once it started being seen by people advocates, like me, were like, I want to be Bailing out Benji, I want to be Benji in my state. So we kind of grew out of necessity, because people want to know how to make a difference. And to answer your question about Benji, that's the most common question we get. Who is Benji? And honestly, Benji is your dog and he's my dog. But more importantly, Benji is all of the animals who leave this earth without knowing kindness, dignity, or love. These are the animals and puppy mills and testing facilities, the lost dogs, the stray dogs, we give them a name because they deserve that.

Jacqueline Piñol 5:52

Right. I love that. And who doesn't know, Benji? The reference. So absolutely. I think that's wonderful. Can I ask, what state were you in when you bought the Siberian Husky at the pet store?

Mindi Callison 6:04

I was in Iowa.

Jacqueline Piñol 6:05

Oh, it was Iowa. Okay.

Mindi Callison 6:07

And so we're a puppy mill state. But we also have a handful of pet stores.

Jacqueline Piñol 6:11

Even today in 2021. There's still pet stores that sell dogs there?

Mindi Callison 6:14

Yeah. Since Bailing Out Benji started, we've gone from 12 puppy selling stores down to four here in the state. Awareness does help. But yes, a lot of states still have puppy mill puppies being sold in stores.

Jacqueline Piñol 6:28

And just, can you give me a simple breakdown? Because I actually don't know the specifics of how a puppy mill becomes a puppy mill and why it's called that and how, how did they get there to a pet store? How is that all tied together?

Mindi Callison 6:41

So I'm gonna answer this in a really short way. Because you know, this, I spend my life talking about this. So really, puppy mills were started in like the 40s, right after World War Two. So this is a generational thing. This isn't something we often see brand new puppy mills popping up, right? It's family businesses that are being passed down. And what happened was, right around World War Two, the men went away to war, the women needed a way to make money. So they started breeding dogs. Beyond that, you started seeing the factory farming of cows and pigs and chickens moving into the Midwest. Because those factory farms were moving in, they were pushing out the small farmer, the person who did have the smaller humane farm. And what did they do, they had to transition their farm from breeding cattle and pigs to breeding dogs. And so we talk about puppy mills. And that's kind of one piece of this puzzle. But there's kind of a whole 'nother world called dog brokering. And these are warehouses that are located in the Midwest. And these dog brokers will essentially take a van around to Midwest puppy mills, and get the shipping list, the shopping list of what the pet stores wanted all the breeds that they wanted. They'll collect them from all the area, puppy mills, and then drive them to pet stores in New York and in Florida, and Washington and Arizona. So there are a lot of pieces to this puzzle.

But the puppy mill tip pet store pipeline is something that advocates across the country have been working very hard to stop in recent years.

Jacqueline Piñol 8:19

So clearly, that started, like you said, in the 40s. And there was all these situations where farmers were at the time due to the changes in the climate and men going off to war for the wives. But it's 2021. How is it that the people who still continue to do this for living haven't clued in or said, "Hey, time to stop breeding? Or let's go back to just farming?" Where's the disconnect?

Mindi Callison 8:44

Honestly, I think the disconnect is happening with the definition of puppy mill. So most puppy mills in the United States, as we know them are USDA licensed or they're state licensed. And so as I'm talking to city council members and I'm educating them about what a puppy mill is, and why they shouldn't allow local pet stores to sell these puppies or kittens, bred and kitten mills. The opposition in the pet industry often says we don't use puppy mills, puppy mills are unlicensed illegal facilities, we use USDA breeders. And so they use these definition changes to trick lawmakers and to trick policymakers and the public to continue supporting them. Because I can tell you and your listeners, if you saw the facilities at a puppy mill, you wouldn't want to support it financially. But as it stands, there's so much smoke and mirrors when it comes to this industry that the public is directly funding it. If we took that money out of it, puppy mills would close puppy selling stores would close and we could help the pet overpopulation problem in a really big way.

Jacqueline Piñol 9:55

Yes, because I do feel that this is the big part of the puzzle that's at the foundation of why there's dog overpopulation, abandonment, you know, so many sick dogs in shelters.

Mindi Callison 10:07

You're exactly right. And one of the things that we do at Bailing Out Benji that makes us unique is I don't just say puppy mills are bad. I don't just say pets or puppies come from puppy mills. We have the data, I spent countless hours pulling public records, basically sifting through it and connecting every pet store across the country to the puppy mills they buy. So pet stores in New York, pet stores in Florida and in Texas to name a few. And in Arizona, they're importing 10s of 1000s of unaltered puppies and kittens in a two or three year period. And those are the states that have the most pet overpopulation. So one of the states like I said being Florida, they in one year imported over 10,000, puppies and kittens that are un-altered so those animals are resold to the public un-altered and then you have accidental litters. You have intentional litters, you have animals abandoned that are strays and get pregnant. The issue really always starts with the puppy mills.

Jacqueline Piñol 11:10

Our canine companions are domesticated animals, why are they under the same umbrella as cows and pigs and other farm animals? So that they're regulated by the USDA? Where does that tie in?

Mindi Callison 11:21

That happened in the 60s, the USDA decided that they could make money, it was lucrative to offer licensing to dog breeders. With that came zero education. And that was again, I should say it was around late 40s, early 50s, where they started licensing. It wasn't until 1966 that they even put laws in place saying what basic care those animals need. And it is 2021. And those laws have not been updated. So in 1966, the USDA said it was okay to keep a dog in a cage that is six inches larger than its body. That was a 1966 when there was no science to prove what animals need. In 2021, we are still following those very lax, outdated regulations that are no more than survival standards.

Jacqueline Piñol 12:12

And you know, I've not been to a puppy mill. I've been to a quote "licensed backyard breeder". It took everything in me not to fall apart and cry and run out of there. Because I had to just keep it together to get the information I needed. But the puppies - there were dachshunds, maltipoos, chihuahuas, poodles. And they were on these grated cages so that their feet actually, you know, so their poop and urine can fall through and they had cages underneath them! Is this the kind of thing we're talking about? I know that our listeners might not want to hear too many graphic things. And I appreciate also, you know, through your mission that you say you stay away from showing the graphic images, but at least sharing the information so that we out here all know what's really happening and that we have the power to change it.

Mindi Callison 13:04

Yeah, so it's completely legal for puppy mills to keep dogs again in cages that are six inches larger than their body, with wire flooring for the feces and urine to drop straight through. Unless a state specifically bans stacked cages. It's still allowed by the USDA. And so these are often images and realities that we face here in the Midwest, the Midwest is known as the puppy mill belt for a reason. We've got all of the big farms, we've got the agriculture and with that comes the puppy mills.

Jacqueline Piñol 13:38

I am just so taken aback by all of this, because it just doesn't seem very progressive. For a first world nation like the United States with as much money and technology that we have across so many arenas in this country. And yet, we're practicing 1940s legislation, what are some of the areas in which you have found progress where you see it moving forward? And how can people help that part of the mission?

Mindi Callison 14:11

So I want to talk pre-COVID world because during 2020, we saw a puppy spike that has never been seen before every family wanted a dog because they were at home. So I'm going to talk pre-COVID for a second. What we were noticing is there was a 30% decrease from 2008 till 2020. Our research basically shows that 30% fewer USDA licensed breeders are active right now. And so we are seeing the worst of the worst facilities going out of business. Public awareness is at an all time high. Thanks to social media. I really credit that with Facebook and Instagram and Twitter and podcasts like you can really get the word out easy. The other place we've really seen a lot of movement is humane ordinances, advocates going to their city and saying, "We no longer want to allow puppy selling stores to be in existence unless they partner with rescues or shelters". The fourth state just signed a bill this week, which prevents pet stores from selling milled animals, which is amazing. And more than 370 localities across the country have fallen in those footsteps.

Jacqueline Piñol 15:26

That's fantastic. And it was the state of Washington, yes. behind what other states who is in line to move these kinds of laws forward? I know California already has.

Mindi Callison 15:37

Yeah, so California's law was the first to go into effect. And it wasn't without its issues, which we can talk about the whole sham rescue world in a second. But California was the first state to pass that kind of law. Behind it was Maryland. And then you have Maine and Washington that have very similar laws where they have a freeze on pet stores. Both of them states only have a handful of like mom and pop shops. They don't have the huge national brands that have moved in to sell puppies. And so those laws are worded where it's a freeze, and no new source can open. But advocates can still work on that local level to pass humane ordinances to require the current source to you know, stop selling puppy mill puppies.

Jacqueline Piñol 16:21

And is Illinois on the list because I know that they are very active in pursuing these kind of laws in Chicago, particularly.

Mindi Callison 16:30

Yeah, this is this year, we saw a record number of states introduced this legislation, New York and Florida are still in session. And they both have a similar bill, Texas surprised all of us coming out of right field. Alright, so we were all very shocked. And then yes, Illinois is they've put in two bills this year, one which would prevent pet stores from partnering with puppy mills, and the other prevents pet stores from using third party predatory lending companies. These companies are using interest rates. So they have interest rates that are upwards of 200% APR. So you have a family who is broke, right? You have me as a college student 10 years ago, I had no idea. And if they would have had predatory lending, I probably would have signed up for that versus a credit card. But that doubles the price of your puppy, more than doubles the price of your puppy. And so Illinois does have a law or has a bill in place right now, that in case they can't ban puppy

selling stores, we can at least get rid of predatory lending, and the pet stores won't be able to survive.

Jacqueline Piñol 17:38

So and as far as the USDA being involved in granting these licenses. So are we the ones that can actually stop the USDA from continuing to do that? Because they themselves are just they'll just do it because nobody's stopping them.

Mindi Callison 17:52

Yeah. So we need everyone across the country to constantly be in touch with their federal congressional leaders not state, state is, you know, great as well. But we really need federal legislation and federal oversight on the USDA, there was a three year period that we refer to as the USDA blackout. And it was in the prior administration where you weren't allowed to see any of the USDA inspection reports you couldn't see a list of USDA licensees. The public was stripped away from being able to do their own research. And that lasted for three years.

Jacqueline Piñol 18:27

What were those years was that 20...

Mindi Callison 18:30

2017 to 2020. Beginning of 2020. And you could not look up inspection reports and advocates rely on those to educate the public. There are some states like Arizona that have a law saying pet stores have to disclose the breeder have to allow the public to know the number and the way to search for USDA reports. That law was debunked at that point. You couldn't do anything with it. I should say defunct, excuse me. That threw a wrench into things specifically, but we do need lawmakers to support legislation that would honestly close down the worst of the worst puppy mills. While we're on the topic of humane ordinances. I do want to mention that our research was instrumental in exposing what we've coined as being called Sham rescues, and this larger nationwide effort to launder puppies from puppy mills into pet stores and cities that have passed ordinances, outlying stores from partnering with puppy mills. And for example, what happened was the state of California in 2019 said it was no longer legal for pet stores to partner with puppy mills. Everybody celebrated.

Jacqueline Piñol 19:43

Yes, I was one of those people. I was so excited to know that we were on the cutting edge of changing these laws.

Mindi Callison 19:49

Right in every one of your newspapers said "puppy mills outlawed", "puppy mills can't be sold in stores". It was huge. It was across the country. So what ended up happening was these dog brokers in the Midwest, the ones who are transporting puppy mills, from, or puppies from puppy mill to pet store. These dog brokers were all of a sudden becoming rescues. They were getting a rescue license in their state. Sometimes they were going as far as getting a 501(c)(3).

Jacqueline Piñol

Whoa, whoa, Really?

Mindi Callison

Yes.

Jacqueline Piñol

Oh, that's so shady.

Mindi Callison

Right. Also, they could continue selling the same commercially bred puppies in pet stores. And when we started noticing this, there was one facility in particular, in Britt, Iowa, very, very small town in Iowa. All of a sudden, this rescue popped up in that town, and it's not too far from me, Iowa, you can drive across the whole state in like four hours. So it's really, you know everyone, you basically do. And so I started looking into their license. And I realized that the business license, the people who were the founding members of this rescue, had all of the same names as one of the largest puppy brokers in the country.

Jacqueline Piñol 20:57

Oh, my goodness.

Mindi Callison 20:59

From there, we did a lawsuit with the animal legal defense fund in California, we were holding these pet stores accountable for breaking the law. And then the Iowa Attorney General got involved. They investigated and they shut down two Iowa sham rescues, because of our research. And so that's kind of another role that we play. You know, we're a watchdog group, we're always keeping our eye on these documents. But unfortunately, there are still many fake rescues across the Midwest operating in this fashion.

Jacqueline Piñol 21:30

Could people reach out to Bailing Out Benji, for example? and say, "Hey, I'm trying to find out if this is a legitimate or a sham rescue? Would you be able to help?"

Mindi Callison 21:38

Yeah, we get emails all the time from the public who wants to know if they can support a particular rescue. Or if this breeder is a good place to buy from. So we're constantly helping on that front.

Jacqueline Piñol 21:49

What would you say to people who are fixated on still buying puppies from breeders? Because they say, "Well, I'm not getting my puppy from a puppy mill". Is that any better? Or are you also advocating put a stop or sort of a be on a watch list? For breeders.

Mindi Callison 22:07

It's really hard. So you know, the general public, a lot of rescues and shelters, use "Adopt, don't shop", I like to use the term "Opt to adopt" in my perfect world, everyone would adopt every animal in a shelter, and we wouldn't have pet overpopulation, we wouldn't have unnecessary euthanasia. That's not the world we live in right now. So we have to work within those means. And it's very important for anyone who wants to buy a dog - A. Go to petfinder.com, look up your breed, many rescues and shelters across the country have every breed of dog available. So that is an option. And I try really hard to get people to do that first. Beyond that, there are what I would call reputable breeders. And this is a grey area. Not everyone agrees, especially in the rescue world. Whether or not you can agree with breeding, I think that we can at least agree that there are breeders who don't mill their animals in that USDA fashion that we've been talking about. Again, I don't want anyone to breed I would much rather everybody adopt, but in the world we live in there is that grey area, and if you're a member of the public who's insisting on buying, you want a breed you want to make sure it's a puppy, whatever the reason, you have to do your research and at Bailing Out Benji we started the phrase, "Show me the mommy". Reputable breeders, as you know, I call them, they want to meet you, but you don't have puppies available all the time. They have waiting lists, they do the genetic tests, there's something called an ofa test. And it's O F A and it tests the genetic heart's health, hips, everything of the animal so you can make sure that they're producing healthy puppies. These animals are living in homes as pets. They're not on the back 40 you know, in a barn, they're not in the backyard living in chains or in rabbit hutches? These are family pets and a truly responsible breeder. And again, I know that's such a touchy subject.

Jacqueline Piñol 24:10

It is it is it even with me, I have to tell you, I have a hard time. It's a bit of an oxymoron in my book, but only because like you said, there are some people who are just going to do what they're going to do because they can't think outside of that. And that's okay. Look, I did admit that in the first episode of this podcast that I got my first dog from a breeder. And granted she was a pug breeder who bred her pugs at home and I met the mommy and I met the dad and all that. I never did it again after the light bulb went off, and I realized wait a minute, my dog, there's 1000s of these up for rescue of the same breed. So I guess if we can enlighten people to maybe adopt their next dog, or to consider saving a life next time, then that's progress to me.

Mindi Callison 24:57

You're exactly right. And honestly, my job, my role in this world is to take the cruelty out of the purchase. So if I can get someone who is dead set on buying a puppy, if I can get them to walk away from a pet store to walk away from a puppy mill, and find someone who's doing it a little more ethically, that's what I need to do, because I have to take the money away from the puppy mills. And to do that, we do have to acknowledge that there are breeders who aren't puppy mills, we can at least admit they aren't puppy mills.

Jacqueline Piñol 25:31

Right. Okay. And you must get your share of backlash. I mean, is that something you and your organization are prepared to take on some times? Because I'm sure there are people who don't like what you do, but it's necessary. How do you deal with the backlash?

Mindi Callison 25:46

First of all, I always say just never read the comments on social media. You just get everyone leaving their opinions. But you know, I'm always game for a healthy debate. I think it's really important as a country as a world to push our boundaries and really expand our way of thinking. The way I'm thinking now is not how I was thinking 10 years ago. 10 years ago, I did say "adopt don't shop", I hated all breeders. That's not something I wanted. Being here in the Midwest, I am vegan, I am very, very compassionate for all animals and all people, I stick out like a sore thumb. And so really to survive, it was more of a - "Who can I partner with to make make the most change"? And we did have a small group of reputable breeders here in our state that would go to the Capitol with me and educate lawmakers about why their puppies don't go to pet stores. And it took a lot of trust. It took a lot of conversation. We don't agree on everything. I would never buy a dog my own my heart dog Zeppelin passed away suddenly, two years ago. And my responsible breeder friends offered to give me a puppy, not buy, you know, they were just like, you can have this well bred purebred black lab. And I was like, "No, thank you". And six months later, we rescued another puppy mill survivor from, he came from a horrible situation. So, I think that you can still try to educate the general public with the, the important messaging and then behind the scenes, we can kind of deal with that nitty gritty of I would never buy a dog. Right. So yeah, it's touchy.

Jacqueline Piñol 27:28

It is a touchy subject. And the funny thing is, as you're telling that story, it reminds me you know, some of my friends are like, well, I don't want a puppy mill survivor. I don't want a possibly sick, injured or dog that could come with many issues. However, if they buy it from a pet store, or they don't meet the mommy, they probably are getting one of those puppy mill dogs, right?

Mindi Callison 27:52

Yeah, the public doesn't quite understand. I hear this a lot. We want to buy a puppy with a clean slate. You want to make sure your puppy is happy and you can train it and all of the answers XYZ, we've heard every excuse. The science is showing that these dogs that are born in puppy mills are not only inherently stressed out, they're receiving all of the stress hormones from their mother. They're being born with an automatic distrust of humans. What the science is showing is that a lot of these puppies do have behavior disorders right away. They tend to be more energetic, they tend to bite more because they were taken away from their litter too soon taken away from the mom too soon. And then you have the wide range of health issues these puppies could have right away. They could be coming to your home with parvo or distemper or coccidia or kennel cough. But down the road, we've had consumer complaints of puppies with hip

dysplasia, puppies that are eight months old, that already have hip dysplasia that have heart murmurs, that have a genetic brain issues.

Jacqueline Piñol 29:01

And a lot of them purebreds people bought them because they were a purebred.

Mindi Callison 29:04

Purebred, or the designer dogs now the doodle everything, and so genetics do matter. And, you know, for me adopting I'm happy to take on any health or behavior issues because that's my personality. But for someone who wants to buy the quote unquote "perfect puppy", it's important for them specifically to do their research. Make sure the breeder they're buying from does the genetic testing.

Jacqueline Piñol 29:30

Can you share with us? Do you know when is it too soon, or when is the right time to wean a puppy from its mother.

Mindi Callison 29:36

Typically most of the national breed clubs in the science says it is important to keep a puppy with its mom and its litter mates for between 10 and 12 weeks old. What we're seeing in puppy mills is that they are leaving their family by seven or eight weeks old to be sold to a pet store. And so again, what the public doesn't quite understand is before the puppy is even sold in a pet store or sold online in a website. It's already exchanged hands three or four times. So it was born in a puppy mill, it hit the transport van where it's transported for 24 to 28 hours, depending on where the store is, it goes to the store, it's cleaned up, put in the glass cage, and then the public buys it. So the first week of its life, as it's leaving its family, it's confusing. The puppies in the back of a van with 100 or 200 other dogs, USDA reports back me up on that that's not an exaggeration. They do put hundreds of puppies in the backs of a van. And then they drive and make deposits, they stop at, dozens of pet stores along the way. And then by the time the puppy gets to the store, it is sick, it is dirty, it needs a bath, and then it's immediately photographed and put up for sale.

Jacqueline Piñol 30:53

Wait, so are you saying that the USDA is okay with this entire process that you're describing?

Mindi Callison 30:58

Yes, every step of the way. These facilities are licensed either by the USDA or by the state.

Jacqueline Piñol 31:03

So our laws are saying it's okay for you guys to do this. Go ahead.

Mindi Callison 31:08

Yes.

Jacqueline Piñol 31:10

It just makes me sick to my stomach you know? And sorry, I just have to take a pause there for a minute because it just boggles my mind. Especially just, I'll tell you why. Because I understand when it started, how it started and all that right. But like we said, it's 2021. And all of us are just we know more we have so many more resources. There's so many more of us on the right side of things fighting to fix this, and yet we can't win. It's pretty mind boggling to me.

Mindi Callison 31:37

Right? And one of the statistics that shocks people the most is the USDA inspectors that are going into puppy mills and writing them off saying they're okay. They're also inspecting zoos and circuses and aquariums. There are around 120 USDA inspectors for 12,000 facilities across the country.

Jacqueline Piñol 31:57

Oh my goodness.

Mindi Callison 31:59

So one day they might be inspecting a giraffe at a zoo to see if the giraffes cages are okay. And then the next day they inspect a dog and a puppy mill. So they're not experts on breed. They're not experts on canines or cats because cats are born in kitten mills as well. And this goes all the way down. Honestly, any animal you find for sale in a pet store comes from a mill. But these inspectors are not experts on animals. They're experts on "Yeah, the cages clean". "Yeah, looks big enough". "Yeah, it's sound". They do not care about the mental health or the mental stimulation of the animals of those facilities.

Jacqueline Piñol 32:38

Why do we only have 120? Is it funding?

Mindi Callison 32:42

Honestly, it must be. The USDA itself has addressed that they have their own issues. Since 2018, they have given 60% fewer violations across the country when it comes to their licensees. Their last audit, they bragged that 99% of their facilities were in compliance. They talk about their the breeders, the facilities as customers that their customer service focus that's on their website. Again, this is very much a business transaction. You give me money for a license, I you know, say you're okay. And that's it. And the animals are the ones suffering.

Jacqueline Piñol 33:22

It's hard to comprehend. And look, I would have to interview an inspector to know if, you know that touches them and if they can sleep at night or but they have to put food on the table so they have to get a paycheck. Or if this is something they absolutely hate to do, and they don't know how else to get around it. Right.

Mindi Callison 33:39

Right.

Jacqueline Piñol 33:40

Have you ever had anyone from the USDA approach you and say, Look, I can't stand my job. I I don't want to do it anymore. This is what's happening and come clean to some of the things they've had to do.

Mindi Callison 33:49

Not yet.

Jacqueline Piñol 33:50

Okay. That would be an interesting conversation. Right?

Mindi Callison 33:54

I will say there's a wonderful book called *The Doggie In The Window* and we interviewed Rory Kress on our podcast. It's called *Truth, Lies and Puppy Mills*. But Rory, she was one of those consumers. She was very educated. She worked for *The Today Show* in New York. She walked into a pet store and bought a puppy because she was told that's how you get dogs. And finally it kind of clicked like, well, why did my dog why does its paper work for it say Missouri? Why did the pet store not tell me this? She started doing her own research and her book was born. She does interview the USDA about their role in puppy mills. And it's a fascinating book, I have two copies, one is pristine and signed and beautiful. And the other one I'm not kidding it's dog eared it's highlighted.

Jacqueline Piñol 34:39

Oh my gosh, I'm gonna get it.

Mindi Callison 34:40

Every time I read it, I learn something. So, the USDA just doesn't think what they're doing is wrong. And in recent years, they've gone a step further to protect puppy mills. Instead of writing down violations. They do something called a teachable moment. And they'll just have a conversation with the facility and they'll say "You know, if you clean that up before I come back in two to three years, we'll just call it a teachable moment". And it doesn't get written down. So that on the USDA report, it looks like they were clean. They had no violations. But it's all happening off the books, off the record.

Jacqueline Piñol 35:16

Gosh, it's just all so troubling. Where to begin? A couple of things. And then I want to talk about your podcast, because I'm glued to it, just so you know. And I want our listeners to hear all about it, because the topics you address are fantastic. But back to what you're saying about the USDA. So the farmers, you know, they get away with continuing to run their puppy mill business. But like you said, some of these are farmers who have cows and pigs and chickens, is that right?

Mindi Callison 35:41

Yes.

Jacqueline Piñol 35:41

So is some of the backlash against the changing in laws for canines? Because they're afraid we're going to move in, and now change the laws for cows and pigs and chickens. And that at the at the end of the day, is it about the almighty dollar for them?

Mindi Callison 35:55

Yeah, what I hear all across the country is "laws for dogs will trickle down to hogs". And so it's really important for your listeners to know too, here in the Midwest, in Iowa, specifically, a lot of our congressional or our state leaders, our policymakers own factory farms, and they own puppy mills. We have one legislator, his cousin owns a puppy mill with hundreds of dogs. That puppy mill sells puppies to pet stores across the country. And two years in a row that policymaker tried to pass a bill here in Iowa, that wouldn't allow me as a constituent as a citizen of my state. I couldn't pass a humane ordinance. They're taking away my right. They're taking away the right of local elected officials. And it all comes down to the dollar.

Jacqueline Piñol 36:43

Unbelievable. I mean, it's a tough fight. I really admire the work that you're doing. I respect it so much, and want to know how our listeners can find out more about helping Bailing Out Benji? Why does Bailing Out Benji, the nonprofit organization as an entity need funding? And how can people use their funding to help you?

Mindi Callison 37:05

So first and foremost, we are a nonprofit. So all donations are tax deductible. But we provide a service that no one else in the country provides with those, those public records requests that we pull. I don't say we pull them. I mean, I do but they cost us 1000s of dollars. So for one state I just did a records request on to get the pet store connections. It costed Bailing Out Benji \$1400, for one year's worth of pet store records. It's a Freedom of Information Act request, it's a public records request. But what I do is, you know, we raise funding, we get those records, and then I make them public on our website. So you can go to bailingoutbenji.com, you can see a list of every state every pet store in the state and where they're getting their puppies from. Because, again, if we can take the cruelty out of the purchase, and we can educate consumers as they Google it on their phone, then we can hopefully stop the worst of the worst puppy mills, and push for legislative change. And our research is being used on the local and state level. I do have legislators who have called me and wanted to know more about the pet stores in Texas, and where they're sourcing dogs from. We're a 501(c)(3), not a lobbying group. But I can educate policymakers with our hard facts and data. And that's more important sometimes than the emotional, sad footage of dogs being in puppy mills.

Jacqueline Piñol 38:34

Correct. Yes, yes, there are people out there. And sometimes myself included, because I too, sometimes get exhausted. And my heart hurts with the images and the things I find out are going on. So I want to know, where can I make a donation to start at where this begins, which is a foundation like Bailing Out Benji, who is making that change and trying to fight to make those changes. So something comes to mind as you're talking about the changes that need to be made with policy. And when you were mentioning that reputable breeders as hard as that term is for me, I promise I'm going to work on that. It's actually to their benefit across the country to fight to end puppy mills, and pet stores so that a reputable breeder isn't a term that people like myself or other dog rescues lash out against. I do believe and I can see the perspective. So I thank you for opening up that possibility of that there is a correct and possibly viable way to breed safely and healthy dogs. But we have to end the puppy mills and the pet stores. And until then, I think that's why everything gets grouped together. And all of us who see this problem just can't get over it and we say stop the breeding now. All over the country. Done.

Mindi Callison 39:54

Yeah, honestly, we do see that on social media all the time, we do a post about anything and we hear, you know, "Breeder buy and shelter dogs die". There's so many slogans out there and they're effective, they get their point across. But at the end of the day, we need to find those areas that we can find, you know, like minded people, and we can make incremental change, because this has been happening for 60 years. And we're still scratching the surface of the problem. So we need to find the allies that, you know, think like minded, we can set aside our differences and just work on this issue together, and then fight each other 50 years in the future when there are no more puppy mills, but right now, the puppy mills are the enemy.

Jacqueline Piñol 40:39

Okay. Yeah. And you know, I did read something about dog auctions. I'm almost afraid to ask you what they are. But can you touch upon what that means?

Mindi Callison 40:49

Yeah, so this is another really grey area of rescue. You know, we talked about reputable breeder being touchy, this is another very touchy subject. On the base level of it, when you go to a dog auction, these are barns that the public can go to, rescues can go to, breeders always go to. And essentially, it is someone getting rid of their breeding stock. Of course, I believe that every dog is a heartbeat at my feet, I don't refer to them as breeding stock. But when you go to these dog auctions, you walk into a barn, and first you're hit with the smell, right? Every puppy mill smells the same. They all really look the same. But you're hit with this, this horrible smell and it doesn't leave your nose. And you see cages of dogs that are terrified. They've never seen humans before besides the puppy mill owner, but they've especially never seen dozens of humans at a time. And so they're in cages. They're shaking, they're looking at you with their wide eyes. They're looking almost through you, because they just can't even process what's going on.

Jacqueline Piñol 41:55

It's heartbreaking.

Mindi Callison 41:56

It is and it's legal.

Jacqueline Piñol 41:57

Have you been?

Mindi Callison 41:59

I have been to a few dog auctions in the Midwest. So, there are two auction houses in Missouri. And that's kind of where the bulk of these auctions happen. Every single weekend in Missouri, when a puppy mill goes out of business in Iowa, one of the auction houses will come all the way to Iowa and sell off those dogs and the property and you know, everything there. But typically the dog auctions are concentrated in Missouri.

Jacqueline Piñol 42:25

And I did read something that sometimes dog rescue organizations are going there with the intent of saving these dogs. And the dog auctions the dogs are supposedly not supposed to be very expensive. But now dog auctioneers have gotten word that people from the rescue world will pay anything, will raise money to just save the dogs. So the prices have gone up.

Mindi Callison 42:45

Yeah, so this, this is why it's a touchy issue. So imagine, you know, when I was just describing what the building looks like, you were horrified. I physically saw you react to what I was saying. So now imagine being there in person, and you're sitting in the audience and you just want to report because that's what I did. I went as a researcher, I wanted to know what was going on. And all of a sudden there's a table with five terrified dogs on it. And back in the day when I founded Bailing Out Benji dogs were going for pennies, they were going for quarters. You could save 30 dogs for \$30. And to me that's not supporting the puppy mill industry, right? You're getting the retired breeding dogs out. What ended up happening in around 2014, there were breed specific sellouts where one kennel was completely liquidating and getting rid of all of their very expensive breed. And reputable breeders from across the country, breed enthusiasts from across the country raised money and bought every single dog out of the auction.

Jacqueline Piñol 43:43

What breeds, for example?

Mindi Callison 43:44

That one was a King Charles Cavalier dog auction. And I mean, it's a cute dog, you don't want to, you know, see Cavalier suffering in puppy mills. And so, when enthusiasts when breed enthusiasts saw this, they decided to pool their money and save every dog. And they did.

Unfortunately, they spent hundreds of 1000s of dollars doing so and from there birthed, several breed specific rescues, but that effort was really a concerted effort by breed lovers. And then the next month, there was another papillon dog auction, where again, breed enthusiasts, reputable breeders, everyone worked together to get all of those dogs out. And that's kind of when a light bulb went off in the breeding the breeding world and they have decided that rescues are going to these auctions even more, and they're willing to buy the old, the sick, the pregnant and the puppies, they want to save as many as possible. And it's an ethical discussion that is constantly happening in the rescue world. Do you buy, yes or no? If yes, how much can you spend? What's the right amount to save a life and when you're right there in that moment, all all of you your thoughts go out the window, you're you're bidding with your heart, you're not bidding with your brain. You want to save as many as you can.

Jacqueline Piñol 45:01

You know, when I was at that backyard breeder I was telling you about it was in Georgia in the woods off a two lane highway, my husband, I were just driving through on a road trip. And I saw the sign and it said, you know, pet connection, I think they're closed now, but oh, well, I said it. And when we pretended to be a couple on a road trip, then to buy a puppy, it was the only way she would show them to us. She wouldn't show us the moms and the dads, she only showed us the babies. And I wanted to buy every single one of them. And they were \$300 a piece. And there was an 18 year old poodle who could barely keep herself standing up. And she wouldn't sell her to me. She said, "Oh, she's just going to live out the rest of her days in the cage". Those were the words out of her mouth. And I mean, I can't tell you I am. I'm an actor by nature I am. That's my job, my day job. And it was the hardest role I have ever had to play is to pretend that at the core, I wasn't falling apart and ready to run out of there.

Mindi Callison 45:47

Now imagine you have a pocket full of cash and the means to raise a lot of money to save as many as possible. And that's where the ethical dilemma comes in. Do you save money to save breeder dogs? And is it the same as "saving", quote unquote, a dog from a pet store? So, I will say the background information, the article that you read that everyone references all the time, it was put out there to muddy up the waters. When I go to city council meetings to talk about passing humane legislation. It gets thrown in our face that retail rescues are buying dogs, it's the same. They're buying dogs from puppy mills. Why are you saying that now pet stores have to support rescues? It turns into a conversation about what's okay with rescues, instead of the root of the problem. If puppy mills didn't exist, dog auctions wouldn't exist. And we wouldn't be talking about, quote unquote, "retail rescues", we wouldn't have to talk about pet stores, we wouldn't have to talk about online websites. The root of the problem is always puppy mills. And this talking point of getting rescues angry at each other really defeats us at the local level when we're trying to pass laws. And that was its intention.

Jacqueline Piñol 47:14

Right there skewing the conversation to take away from what's at the core, which is you still want to close puppy mills, that is the goal at the end of the day.

Mindi Callison 47:22

Right.

Jacqueline Piñol 47:22

And you know, there are so many topics I could bring up. I mean, we could be here for hours, but I won't keep you so tell us the name of your podcast and tell our listeners some of the topics that you have addressed on your podcast. And I highly recommend the podcast. I've been listening to it myself. It's it's really eye opening. Really terrific work.

Mindi Callison 47:44

Well, thank you. We honestly started our podcast, Truth, Lies and Puppy Mills out of necessity. All of our events were cancelled during COVID-19. They're still canceled this year. And so we needed a way to keep this conversation going. We are not podcast experts. But we are puppy mill experts. And so I'm joined every week with my friend Ashley Dale from the state of Washington, and Nicole Galvan from the state of Arizona and they're both Bailing Out Benji volunteers. And every week we just have discussions on the industry. So whether you want to listen every week, or you want to pick a few episodes to learn more about, we try to keep our episodes themed. And we did just wrap up a four part series on dog auctions. We did a legislative series on how to pass local ordinances, how to lobby on the state level, and what preemption bills are and why puppy mills are trying to take away your right to pass those ordinances. You know, we interview authors, we interview scientists, and we've interviewed a reputable breeder about how important genetic testing is. And you know why she is actively fighting puppy mills. And we even sat down with pet store employees who started working at pet stores because they love puppies. And then were horrified to learn what was going on behind the scenes and later quit. So we try to do this in a very easy, you know, laid back way. It's a conversation between three friends. We release every episode on all of the podcast apps, but also on YouTube. Because some people want to watch us they want it to look like a Zoom call and they want to feel involved in the conversation.

Jacqueline Piñol 49:24

Awesome. Oh you guys have it like a Zoom call. Oh, that's really fun. Okay, well, I am going to have all the live links. So we'll definitely include the podcast one, you'll have to share with us what that is. And for our listeners who want to find out more about Bailing Out Benji or want to support your mission, where can they follow you on social media?

Mindi Callison 49:43

Bailing Out Benji is on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, we got a TikTok now, we're young, right? And it's just @BailingOutBenji, and it's b-e-n-j-i, a lot of people don't know how to spell it,

which is okay. And my favorite is when people call us "Saving Benji". But either way you Google us and we'll pop up.

Jacqueline Piñol 50:03

Okay, okay, great. Yes, I will definitely add those links at the end of the show notes for this episode. And our listeners should know that I am not getting paid to advocate for any one organization on this podcast. I choose to interview guests from organizations that I know are doing the good work for dogs and for people across America. Bailing Out Benji has The Canine Condition seal of approval from me. Thank you so much, Mindy, for all of this wonderful information you've shared, you've really moved me today, I have to say I had to take a step back and take some deep breaths. But all for a good reason. We all want to be more educated and know where we can get more tools to help. So I really do hope my listeners will reach out to Bailing Out Benji, or follow you on social media to get in touch and stay informed on the latest news, with your mission and with legislation on this topic.

Mindi Callison 50:56

And I just want to add earlier, you asked how people could financially support us. We need people on social media just talking about puppy mills. So if you learn something today, tweet about it, make a Facebook status, do something and to make your corner of the Earth a little more educated, because that's what it's going to take in order for us to stop puppy mills.

Jacqueline Piñol 51:16

All right, you got it. I will be doing that. I promise. Thank you, Mindi. Thank you for joining us on The Canine Condition podcast.

Mindi Callison 51:23

Thank you so much.

Jacqueline Piñol 51:25

From the information we've heard in this episode. It's clear that on this topic, and perhaps many others that speak to your heart, it is counterproductive to live in today's society governed by laws created in the 1940s and the 1960s. A time when our parents, grandparents, and even our great grandparents had other needs and faced different challenges. I hope this conversation with Mindi has empowered you to speak up and take action that demands necessary changes in our communities. So we can help stop animal suffering at the hands of our farmers, lawmakers, sometimes neighbors, and even friends. Let's carve a path for future generations that is filled with progress. In the words of activist and advocate Marian Wright Edelman, I leave you with this thought. "If you don't like the way the world is, you change it. You have an obligation to change it. You just do it one step at a time." Thank you for joining me on this episode. Please, press subscribe on our podcast and tell a friend about it. Until next time, hang on to those leashes! The Canine Condition. Come, sit, stay.