

President Obama and the story of "Baby"

By Jana Kohl

During the campaign, then-Senator Obama and his wife promised their daughters that they would get a dog after the election. This made lighthearted news after the President-elect mentioned it in his acceptance speech, but there is a tragic side to the story, due to a special 3-legged dog named "Baby" who found her way into Barack Obama's arms when he was a newly elected Senator.

The public promise to adopt a rescue dog is unprecedented for a First Family, and has the potential to strike a crippling blow to one of the cruelest industries imaginable- dog breeding- an industry that costs taxpayers billions. Most Americans aren't aware that their hard-earned tax dollars are squandered to the tune of billions a year on animal control due to pet overpopulation, an epidemic perpetuated by the dog breeding industry. The economic crisis we now face demands that every sector be scrutinized for greed, mismanagement, and deception-not just Wall Street.

The houses-of-horror known as "puppy mills," where breeding dogs are locked in cages 24 hours a day, spinning endlessly in circles as they go insane from lifetime confinement, never allowed to walk on solid ground, covered in their own feces and that of the dogs stacked in cages above them, maimed or diseased yet still forced to breed every heat cycle, is an industry that has gone unchecked and is nothing short of legalized torture. The scores of puppies churned out of these mills each year mean a death sentence for millions of homeless shelter dogs, who wait in vain for someone to adopt them, only to be dragged to the gas chamber. Every time someone buys a puppy from a dog breeder instead of adopting one of those deserving critters, it not only seals their sad fate, it costs you and me a bundle. And yet the dog breeders continue to churn out their cruel cash crop, an income that many brag is easily hidden from the IRS.

One survivor of these hellholes is a dog named "Baby" who found her way into the spotlight with then-Senator Obama. Known previously by a number, "94," tattooed in her ear, this gentle creature had her vocal cords cut by the mill owners so they wouldn't have to hear her cries to be let out of her cage, and after her rescue had her leg amputated as a result of osteoporosis that is common among breeding dogs.

When I learned the shocking truth about the dog breeding industry, I vowed to adopt rather than buy a dog from one of these animal abusers, and to tell the country their dark secret. I enlisted my new Senator, Barack Obama, to help tell Baby's story to the world, and several of his colleagues, Republicans and Democrats alike, as well as celebrities from all walks-Judge Judy, the New York Mets, Steven Tyler, Bill Maher, even rabbis and priests who I contacted to weigh in on animal cruelty from a religious perspective. Those essays and portraits comprise the book, *A Rare Breed of Love: The True Story of Baby and the Mission she Inspired to Help Dogs Everywhere* (Fireside, an imprint of Simon & Schuster), which has sent Baby and me on a grueling cross-country tour the past several months, culminating in a proposed bill named for her that would ban lifetime confinement of breeding dogs. "Baby's Bill" (H.R. 6949/S. 3519) is co-sponsored by Representatives Sam Farr (D-CA), Jim Gerlach (R-PA), Lois Capps (D-CA), Terry Everett (R-AL), and Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), and would require that breeding dogs be let out of their cages for 60 minutes of exercise a day-a baby step as far as I'm concerned, yet one that's likely to be opposed by dog breeders, "Cruella de Villes" that they are.

I remember the photo shoot we did with then-Senator Obama, when he held Baby close, snuggled and kissed her, distressed to hear of her abuse, and an email he later sent to his Illinois constituents, telling them about her and his commitment to stopping all forms of animal cruelty. President-elect Obama has made history in so many ways, and now the incoming First Family has achieved another first that could not only end a cruel industry, but would also save taxpayers billions. The simple act of acquiring a family pet through adoption will undoubtedly inspire millions of Americans to follow their lead, meaning that millions of homeless dogs slated for death may instead find loving homes, drastically reducing the cost of animal control. The dog breeding industry will see their sales drop dramatically, and countless victims like Baby, locked away at this very moment, prisoners condemned to life behind bars, will be spared that nightmarish existence.

Like all the members of the House and Senate who posed with Baby for the book, Barack Obama understands that this kind of legalized cruelty must end. What the Obamas also see is a wonderful opportunity to teach their daughters a lesson in compassion and mercy by bringing a homeless pet into their family. One of the greatest ways to build character in our children is to encourage compassion toward animals, as the National Parent-Teacher Association states.

It was fitting that we chose the Lincoln Memorial as the backdrop for President-elect Obama's portrait with Baby. President Lincoln himself was an animal lover who once saved the life of a dog, a poignant story recounted in Baby's book. I believe the 16th President is looking down in approval upon our 44th, for so many reasons.

And little does a voiceless, 3-legged dog know, she has helped make history, too.

Jana Kohl, Psy.D. is a psychologist, animal welfare advocate, and author of *A Rare Breed of Love: The True Story of Baby and the Mission she Inspired to Help Dogs everywhere* (Fireside, an imprint of Simon and Schuster).