A dark, unheated barn held an appalling secret: nearly 100 dogs kept in rusty cages, shivering as the wind blew through. Many had hurt their feet on the wire; one had lost a paw. “Dogs were so filthy and uncared for it was difficult to tell what breed they were,” says HSUS Tennessee state director Leighann McCollum. An anonymous tip to the sheriff’s office led to their rescue.

**02.02.2011 TENNESSEE**

97 DOGS RESCUED

A dark, unheated barn held an appalling secret: nearly 100 dogs kept in rusty cages, shivering as the wind blew through. Many had hurt their feet on the wire; one had lost a paw. “Dogs were so filthy and uncared for it was difficult to tell what breed they were,” says HSUS Tennessee state director Leighann McCollum. An anonymous tip to the sheriff’s office led to their rescue.
The details are depressingly similar—sick, suffering dogs languishing in row after row of wire cages—but closing each puppy mill down is a struggle all its own for HSUS staff and partners.

JOHNSTON, S.C. — He is hungry in the weeks before the rescue—always hungry. The food they bring is never enough. Not for him and the other dog in the small chain-link kennel. Day by day, he grows weaker, thinner, though a thick coat of matted fur hides the way his ribs stick through his skin. Day by day, he waits, nearly forgotten, in the warren of miserable pens and cages that fill the back of Callie Abel’s yard in Johnston, S.C. The “Labradoodle” (Labrador-poodle mix) is way too old to sell. He isn’t that valuable a breeder. His condition might raise suspicions if he is passed on to a rescue. So he wastes away.

When rain falls, the kennel’s dirt floor turns to mud. When sun shines, the dirt turns to dust. For relief from the heat, the dog digs into the dirt. But the fleas bite him; there is no escape. Sometimes Abel or a helper brings fresh water. Sometimes not. Then the liquid left in the sawed-off barrel that is their bowl turns green with algae. He is thirsty, but he cannot drink it.

All around him, as September opens, other dogs suffer. Abel’s website gives this place a pretty name—Calabel Farms—and a nice story: “I have been a dog lover basically since birth. … My focus is on matching wonderful pets with loving homes.” From the fence by the road, all you can see are trees, Abel’s double-wide trailer, and further back more fences. Behind the façade, though, lies a puppy mill with more than 200 dogs: mothers and puppies kept in rabbit hutch-es, females bearing litter after litter until their health fails. A shelter would need four or five people working full-time, seven days a week, to care for these dogs (never mind the nine horses and 48 chickens and other birds also on the property). Abel is trying to do it largely by herself.

At one time, Abel, 54, had been an animal control officer. She had been married to a veterinarian. She should know the care dogs require. But she can’t or won’t provide it.
To save money, Abel supplements the dog food she buys with deer scraps from a local processing plant. She does her own veterinary work, though she is not a veterinarian (her ex-husband supplies prescriptions). Perhaps she takes puppies she plans to sell for the required shots, but she fails to treat most of the dogs for fleas or heartworm. Actually, she is having a hard time just taking care of herself. Her home is filthy and packed with clutter, her yard strewn with junk.

Sometimes dogs die on their own. Sometimes they are put down. Abel burns the bodies in a small pit steps from her door. When there are a lot of dead dogs, she buries them toward the edge of her property in a hole dug with a backhoe.

Abel leaves notes on the backs of envelopes for her current husband: “Jack—this is yesterday’s coffee—in this cup—Also please take 2 large dead dogs today Thanks Love U”; “Hope you feel better today. Can U take dead pup in box on drum by shed with motorcycle—also one in here by heater if dead”; “Please load rifle which is by your feet now on crate Hope you have a good day.”

Neighbors complain about barking and foul odors and fleas. Later, they’ll say they smelled burning flesh. In 2009, an animal control officer visits, but the dogs he sees appear to have food and water. None are dead or dying. And he doesn’t have the means to rescue that many animals. So he goes away. The sheriff’s office knows the situation isn’t right, they just don’t know what to do about it. In 2005, Abel had evaded charges in next-door Aiken County of keeping dogs in unsanitary conditions. She moved to Edgefield County and kept selling puppies online for $200 to $500 apiece. “Designer dogs,” she calls them—a mishmash of all the different breeds imprisoned on her property. She photographs puppies using a makeshift studio in her home and brightly colored cloths as backdrops, captioning the pictures with cute comments written as though in the dogs’ words. She invites people to visit her farm. In reality, the dogs are driven or flown to customers. The only people who get past the no trespassing signs that ring her property are her ex-husband, her current husband, her two sons, a hired helper, and a local woman Abel met at an
Auction where she brings puppies to sell.

Abel has been passing the woman older dogs she no longer wants—females who have failed to breed or care for a previous litter, 3- to 4-month-old male puppies who have grown too big to easily ship to buyers. After about a year, Abel lets the woman into her yard. The woman tells a local rescuer about the conditions. In late May 2012, that rescuer calls the HSUS puppy mill tip line. Her message goes to Ashley Mauceri, manager of animal cruelty response for the Animal Rescue Team. In July, at Mauceri's instruction, the auction acquaintance takes seven small dogs from Abel to a vet. The animals have matted fur, rotting teeth, fleas, and ears filled with dark fluid. This is the evidence The HSUS needs.

On the morning of Sept. 11, a sheriff’s car leads a convoy of SUVs, a truck for hauling horses, and two specially equipped tractor trailers down Holmes Pond Road in Johnston. Inside ride members of the HSUS Animal Rescue Team, South Carolina director Kimberly Kelly, trained volunteers from 14 states, and staff from the Humane Society of Charlotte (North Carolina). Mauceri, the “incident commander,” is hopeful but nervous. “I’m very anxious. I feel like I swallowed a frog.” The week before, someone in the sheriff’s office, trying to reassure a woman who called about the condition of a dog from Calabel Farms, revealed a raid was about to take place. Had word reached Abel?

But when deputies arrive, Abel is still at 200 Holmes Pond Road. If she’s tried to clean up, it’s not apparent. They serve a search and seizure warrant as she steps out of the double-wide with a cup of coffee. She argues with the officers. Before the convoy has even parked, deputies arrest her and take her to the county jail. For the starving Labradoodle and all the other animals, it will soon be over.

**THIS ISN’T THE BIGGEST** of the HSUS-assisted puppy mill cases in 2012, or the most dramatic. But it is one more methodical step toward putting the estimated 10,000 puppy mills in the United States out of business. Every dog will be going to a real home. And every dog will be evidence: Health problems that veterinarians meticulously document will be used to build a case against Abel and to push for reform—in Edgefield County and the nation as a whole.

“When you see it on the news, it looks like two minutes ago we got the complaint, and we’re fully deployed on the ground and pulling animals,” says Tia Pope, manager of puppy mill response for the Animal Rescue Team. “But it takes emails and conversations and visits and videos and almost launching a political campaign—when it’s all said and done, it takes a search warrant. And each one we do, we equip the locals, we recruit volunteers. We empower people to take care of their own backyard.”

The HSUS team begins to sweep the property. Mauceri and Adam Parascandola, director of animal cruelty response, stride through the jumble of objects piled haphazardly in the yard—rusty jumper cables, a colander, milk crates, a carpet cleaner, kid’s bicycles, a rototiller—and enter the double-wide through a side porch cluttered with empty dog food bags and half-assembled cages. Inside, it looks as though someone has come home from shopping time and again but never had the energy to put anything away. There’s the bottom of a crock-pot, the base of a coffeemaker, bags of spices spilling across the stove, and big containers of instant oatmeal, hot dog buns, peanut butter, and syrup. Dirty dishes fill the kitchen sink and beyond. Fly strips are coated with insects. On the one remaining burner that’s accessible sits a
pot containing an oily, murky liquid many days old.

“I don’t see how a person can live in a place like this,” says a sheriff’s deputy.

In the living room, a parrot perches in a cage encrusted with droppings. Further back, a desk is spread with drugs, syringes, IV bags, pills, powders, medicated shampoos, unopened dog toothbrushes—Abel’s vet station. In a corner lies the studio where Abel concocted the images she used to sell dogs: a table with rusty metal legs, draped with a dusty blue quilt and set with doll-sized wicker chairs. Lamps are jury-rigged to light the scene. Nearby, there’s a puppy in a cage. Parascandola assigns that animal and Abel’s three small household dogs codes, H1-01 to H1-04—the start of an inventory of the animals and map of the property.

Outside, team members survey some 60 enclosures. Dogs are barking, yipping, growling. Horses graze around a 3-by-5-foot pile of ash and charred, splintered bones, on grass littered with deer vertebrae and scapulas. Along two sides of the backyard are rows of chain-link kennels like the kind that holds the Labradoodle. Along another side stands a row of big rabbit hutch with slatted metal floors and puddles of urine and feces below.

Field rescue responder Troy Snell crawls into a hutch and a nursing pug-beagle mix emerges from the darkness of a box at the back, slowly, tentatively. The puggle’s nails have grown so long her feet are splayed. She walks almost as though she’s forgotten how.

“Hi mama, how you doing?” says John Moyer of The HSUS’s Stop Puppy Mills Campaign. “You are beautiful. Yes, you are!”

Hidden behind a tall wooden fence lie a score of smaller rabbit hutch tightly packed together. Chickens, ducks, guinea hens, and geese roam the cesspools beneath. Flies swarm. State Sen. Jake Knotts, in a white shirt and tie and gray pinstriped pants, treads through the squalor. He’s here at Kelly’s invitation to see the results of South Carolina’s lax laws. “This is something else, ain’t it? Something you just can’t believe unless you see it.” He approaches a hutch with a black and white terrier puppy. “Come on, touch me, come on.” The puppy’s mother shivers in the doorway. “Ain’t nobody going to bother your puppies,” Knott assures her. “They’re going to wash you and give you a home.”

One by one, senior field rescue responder Rowdy Shaw empties the small hutch, gently wrangling trembling mothers, holding them by the scruffs of their necks so they don’t nip. “You tried to bite me—I’m not food,” he says to a pug whose big eyes follow his every move. He kisses her face, and she tries to lick him.

When he reaches the kennels, Shaw searches out bigger dogs in igloo houses or holes they’ve dug beneath. Many are scared and dart away, teeth bared. Keeping a safe distance, Shaw lassos them with a leash, then wraps a second leash around their jaws as a muzzle so he can pick them up. He’s careful to keep a firm grip. Eventually, they calm in his embrace.

Other dogs greet the rescuers like old friends. A dusky-looking terrier mix missing much of her fur narrows her eyes to slits as she’s hoisted, savoring the human contact. After a moment, her tail begins to wag, like a long ago memory. A brindle boxer hidden in a kennel overgrown with weeds jumps up on the chain-link fence as the rescuers approach, eager for attention.

Way in back, behind a row of other kennels, Mauceri finds the Labradoodle in a kennel with a tethered Labrador. He leaps on her with his big paws, wanting to be loved. She feels through his coat and instantly knows what has happened: “It’s kind
of like survival of the fittest if she puts a cup of food in with more than one dog. Only the dominant dog gets it.” Mauceri lifts the big bundle of dirty brown and white fur in her arms. The reason for the rescue is suddenly immediate, tangible. “He’s a doll—I love him so much. He’s so sweet,” she says. And then she talks to the dog, who is also smiling. “This is what I have been working on for you for three months.”

MOST OF THE DOGS don’t know how to walk on a leash or wouldn’t go along with rescuers even if they did, so every single one of them, friendly or not, is carried toward the mobile kennels in the rigs. A parade of people holding dogs passes through a tent where veterinarians inspect the animals for outward problems: fleas, fur matted with feces, skin conditions, hair loss, overgrown nails, infected paws, gum disease, tooth decay, emaciation, and fly-strike—tops of ears missing because of so many bites. Some dogs look pretty bad. Others appear normal.

“It depends on where they are in the hierarchy in the cage—and if they have a lot of parasites,” explains Pamela Keefe, a volunteer with the Humane Society of Charlotte. “The puppies look really cute. But the puppies are only here for six weeks. … The dirty little secret is what their mom and dad are going through.”

The last to be rescued is a wolfhound running in a pack of dogs who long ago escaped from their kennels. He’s placed aboard the second tractor trailer around 5 p.m., and the rig, lights dimmed, soft music playing, pulls off, on its way to the temporary shelter in a warehouse by the Columbia airport. PetSmart Charities has donated $90,000 for the crates, leashes, collars, and bowls, all of which will go to the Edgefield County Sheriff’s Office when it’s over. Even filled with animals, the big space is fairly quiet. “There are 200 dogs here; they’re silent because they don’t have to compete for food and water, they’re clean, and they’re dry,” says Sára Varsa, director of operations for the Animal Rescue Team.

During the next two days, dogs will be vaccinated, wormed, and given medica-

False Assurance

By her own account, for 20 years—from 1983 into the early 2000s—Callie Abel was an AKC exhibitor, breeding and showing registered, pedigreed dogs. Before his sick, neglected malamutes were seized in October 2011, Mike Chilinski was an AKC-inspected “champion breeder.” (Chilinski was convicted of animal cruelty last year and sentenced to serve five years in prison.)

A dog’s registry speaks just to her pedigree, not whether she’s healthy or from a breeder who gives adequate care, says The HSUS’s Kathleen Summers. The AKC inspects only breeders who register seven or more litters a year, and inspectors are concerned only with the accuracy of record-keeping—whether the parents of a golden retriever, say, were indeed golden retrievers. Meanwhile, the organization maintains a weak stance against puppy mills; a recent HSUS report details its financial ties to the industry and routine opposition to better laws.

Adopting a dog from a shelter or rescue is one of the surest ways to strike a blow against puppy mills. But those set on patronizing a breeder should not buy sight unseen, even if the breeder has an attractive website or a relationship with the AKC. People shouldn’t buy a puppy at a flea market either, because seeing a dog in isolation doesn’t reveal the conditions in which she was raised. Instead, buyers should always go to the breeder’s house and see not only the puppy, but the puppy’s mother and father, plus the other dogs on the property. They should contact the breeder’s references and check for complaints.

“It comes down to transparency, says Summers. Responsible breeders welcome visitors. Puppy mills don’t, because they have something to hide. “People always want a formula for how I recognize a puppy mill. The answer is: You go to their door and ask to see their dogs.”

FOR A CHECKLIST on identifying a responsible breeder, go to humanesociety.org/findbreeder.
tions to prevent kennel cough, worms, fleas, and ticks. Vets will find all the usual signs of long-term neglect: ear mites, tapeworms, eye infections. Some dogs are isolated because of coughing, ringworm, or what appears to be mange. The terrier mix with the wagging tail is one of these. There are sores on her side and back where she’s chewed her skin.

The Labradoodle has blood in his stool, gum disease, conjunctivitis, overgrown nails, and fleas. He weighs 40 pounds. He should be 60. Veterinarians can’t find a way to vaccinate him because his fur is so matted. When it’s his turn to visit the groomer, fur falls off in heaps, until the big dog finally stands, revealed, skin stretched over nearly nothing. He had been ever so slowly on his way to dying. Eyes still bright behind a curtain of bangs, tail still wagging, as he dwindled away. Tangled in the fur on the floor are small pieces of metal, perhaps from the kennel fence. They had torn into his skin every time he lay down. His belly is covered with cuts.

In her mug shot, the corners of Abel’s mouth are turned down in a defiant scowl. Her eyes are angry, her face hard. She looks as if she’s about to yell at you to get the hell off her property. She looks as if she’ll fight the charges, which means the dogs will remain in limbo, housed in the temporary shelter.

But nine days after the rescue, on Sept. 20, she pleads guilty to seven counts of ill treatment of animals and agrees to give up all her dogs, horses, and fowl, other than her three household dogs and parrot. She is ordered to tear down the outdoor enclosures for dogs and told that she will not be permitted to keep more than three dogs and one bird in the future. She is told that to get her pets back she will have to clean up her property within 60 days and pay for them to be cared for in the meantime and spayed and neutered. (She can’t meet those requirements and will soon give them up as well.) She is required to pay $385 in court fees and has to donate hay to Equine Rescue of Aiken for the horses.

Lt. Randy Doran of the Edgefield County Sheriff’s Office says the punishment could have been much greater—each misdemeanor carries a maximum penalty of a $500 fine and 60 days in jail—but he and Mauceri and the judge were thinking about the animals: “If it would have been a major fine, I’m pretty sure she would have gone to a jury trial. We were more concerned about getting the dogs taken away from her.” And Abel has lost a lot more than $385. She has a criminal record. If she brings another dog on her property, she’ll have to spend seven months in jail. And she can’t get back the dogs she once profited from.

“I’m over the moon,” Mauceri says.

SHUTTING DOWN ABEL’S FACILITY was a matter of naming what she was doing. Abel called her business a farm. The HSUS identified it as a puppy mill: an operation that sells dogs for money and fails to breed them appropriately or provide adequate housing, shelter, staffing, nutrition, socialization, sanitation, exercise, and veterinary care. That definition was agreed to last year by The HSUS, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the American Pet Products Association, the Pet Industry Distributors Association, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, and retailers Petco and Petland. Puppy mills flourish in 15 states where dog breeders are largely unregulated. In South Carolina, there is no limit on the number of dogs Abel could keep. And since she sold via the web and not to pet stores, she wasn’t required to be federally licensed and inspected. (That situation will change if the USDA implements a proposed rule to regulate online puppy sellers. The HSUS has pushed for the reform, mobilizing 350,000 supporters to submit comments in favor, and also urged passage of the PUPS Act, which would similarly close the loophole. That bill was reintroduced in Congress in February.)

Last year, after The HSUS began offering a $5,000 reward, the organization received more than 600 leads from its puppy mill tip line (1-877-MILL-TIP), the web, and state directors. Based on these, staff assisted with rescue operations in North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, Mississippi, Texas, Wisconsin, Michigan, West Virginia, and Canada, rescuing a total of 1,695 dogs.

Whether a tip ultimately results in an HSUS deployment depends on many factors: how relevant, reliable, and recent the information is; whether the case is big or difficult enough to require the organization’s direct involvement; whether the local law enforcement agency wants to proceed with the case; and what charges can be brought under state and local laws. Also on the availability of local partners and the logistical challenges of transporting, temporarily housing, and then placing scores to hundreds of animals. If a state lacks a law requiring those convicted to pay for the care of seized animals, then The HSUS has to be ready to cover that cost.

There are strategic considerations as well. If HSUS staff are pushing for change in a particular state where regulations are lax, cases can bring media attention and
win the support of politicians. That's what's happening in North Carolina, home to the American Kennel Club’s operations center, which gets millions of dollars in registration and pedigree fees from puppy mills. The AKC has tried to block reform in North Carolina and across the country.

In the Carolinas and Georgia, the Johnston case gets a lot of press. TV reporters travel in from Greenville and Augusta. Scores of people denounce Abel online. Knotts, the state senator, pledges action—state licensing and inspection requirements for all commercial breeders (though he’s later unseated in the November election). Early in 2013, a bill is introduced to increase penalties for animal cruelty.

One mind is not changed, however. “What crime am I guilty of committing?” Abel asks on the website she once used to sell dogs. She tells an ABC station that she is a victim of The HSUS. She contacts the ACLU for help (they turn her down).

While Abel protests, the rescued dogs are miles away, safe and well cared for at shelters and rescues in South Carolina, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C. Two dogs require surgeries for back and bone injuries. Others are being spayed and neutered and readied for adoption, getting used to dog food, gaining weight, growing back fur, and opening up to people.

The brindle boxer is among the first to find a home. One Friday evening in October, the Griebners of Laurel, Md., come to pick her up at the Washington Animal Rescue League in D.C. Other dogs from Calabel Farms are still huddling at the back of their steel and glass kennels, too frightened of people for visitors to handle. The boxer is ready, her tail stub wagging. She’s still skinny, but that will change.

“I wasn’t planning on a boxer,” says Sue Griebner. “I wasn’t planning on a 2-year-old. I wasn’t planning on one that had had puppies. But there’s something about this dog.”

Sue’s daughter Emma, 14, names the boxer Bella, after a character in the Twilight series.

The terrier who lost so much hair has a slower recovery. Gary Willoughby, president and CEO of the SPCA Albrecht Center for Animal Welfare in Aiken, names her Emma. Once on a better diet, with enough vitamins and protein, her reddish fur grows back. But she remains shy. Willoughby fosters her in his home and she finally begins to relax, with him and with his dogs. One day a walk takes them past a shooting range and she goes crazy at the sound of gunshots. “You could tell she’d heard that before,” he says. “It really scared her.”

And Mauceri’s favorite?

In January, an email arrives from a woman who adopted the Labrador. She’s given the dog the name Roodle, though sometimes she just calls him Handsome. “I imagine you and your coworkers were the first friendly faces Roodle had [ever] encountered,” writes Blake Marler. “You thanked me for saving his life; I need to thank y’all! … Roodle is the best dog I’ve ever had.”

Attached are photos, ordinary and amazing: Roodle sitting with fluffy fur, curls of unsullied chestnut brown and pure white; Roodle’s smiling face at the center of a Christmas card; Roodle jumping up on the lower bunk of a bed where Marler’s son, Will, lies, eyes still closed, one arm stretched out to greet his friend.

In Johnston, the kennel where Roodle languished lies in ruins. It will never hold another dog again.