Pit bull saved woman — so she clones him

$50,000 later, Californian has 5 puppies thanks to S. Koreans, but some frown on procedure

By Hyung-Jin Kim

Associated Press

August 6, 2008

SEOUL — Bernann McKinney says her beloved pit bull Booger saved her life when another dog attacked her and then learned to push her wheelchair while she recovered.

He died in 2006 but now he's back — at least in clone form, after the birth last week of puppies replicated by a South Korean company.

"Yes, I know you! You know me too!" McKinney, of California, cried joyfully Tuesday, hugging the puppy clones as they slept with one of their two surrogate mothers, both Korean mixed-breed dogs, in a Seoul laboratory.

The five clones were created by Seoul-based RNL Bio in cooperation with a team of Seoul National University scientists who in 2005 created the world's first cloned dog, a male Afghan hound named Snuppy.

The project is headed by Lee Byeong Chun, a former colleague of disgraced scientist Hwang Woo Suk, whose purported breakthroughs in stem cell research were revealed as fake. Independent tests, however, proved the team's dog cloning was genuine.

Lee's team has since cloned some 30 dogs and five wolves but says Booger's clones, for which McKinney paid $50,000, are the first successful commercial cloning of a canine.

The procedure, which costs up to $150,000, is drawing criticism from animal-rights groups that oppose cloning pets. They say it can lead to malformed offspring and exploitation of surrogates and egg donors, as well as unfounded claims that the new animal is an exact copy of the original.

"It's fraught with animal welfare concerns and it does not bring back a loved one," said Martin Stephens, vice president for animal research issues at The Humane Society of The United States.

There are millions of homeless dogs and cats in the U.S., Stephens said, and "we don't need new sources to compete with animal shelters and reputable breeders."
McKinney, 57, a screenwriter who taught drama at U.S. universities, contacted Lee after her dog died of cancer in April 2006. She had earlier gone to U.S.-based Genetics Savings and Clone, but it shut down in late 2006.

The South Korean scientists took the dog's frozen cells to Seoul in March and nurtured them before launching formal cloning work in May, according to RNL Bio.

"The cells' status was indeed bad as they had been stored for a long time," Lee said in a phone interview.

"But the scientific technology has also developed compared with when we cloned Snuppy. There is no room for any doubt over whether they are real clones," said Lee, whose team has identified the puppies as Booger's genuine clones. His university's forensic medicine team is conducting reconfirmation tests.

Lee said the five clones, which share identical white spots below their necks, were all healthy.

McKinney said she was especially attached to Booger because he saved her from an attack by another dog three times his size.

"I believe that Booger was an angel that God rented out to me for [a] short period of time," she said. "And he knew I would be lost without him, so he sent me some more. He sent me five more mini-Boogers."

She said she has named the clones Booger McKinney, Booger Lee, Booger Ra, Booger Hong and Booger Park, after herself and the South Korean scientists who achieved the cloning.

McKinney said she will take three of the cloned dogs to her home, where she lives with five other dogs and three horses. She plans to donate the others to work as service dogs for the disabled or elderly.

Copyright © 2008, Chicago Tribune