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**Web Edition**

## Property Owners Can Now Detect Mold With the Help of a Four-Legged Detective

By Laura Goldblatt

In the wake of a spring filled with countless flood warnings and innumerable rainy days, Northeasterners might be worried about mold thriving in their homes, offices, and schools.

Luckily, —Princetonians have more tools than most at their disposal — Oreo, the first certified Mold Dog in the Northeast, is the newest avenger in the fight against mold.

Oreo, a one-year old black Labrador mix with a white stripe down her chest, is owned by Jason Earle, the founder of Princeton-based Lab Results LLC ([www.labresultsllc.com](http://www.labresultsllc.com)) located on Witherspoon Street, a company that specializes in finding mold, eliminating it, and then waterproofing the area to prevent the problem from reoccurring.

"She's my best friend — I can't imagine living without her now," Mr. Earle said. "If all of a sudden her nose stopped working, she would be worth every penny and I've only had her for about five months. I wouldn't give her up for a million dollars — she's absolutely amazing. It's like a person is trying to get out of her."

Mold, a multi-cellular fungus that can grow on anything from wood to carpet and flourishes in damp conditions, is the fastest growing species on the planet. Though health problems caused by mold are debatable, explained Mr. Earle, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, molds can trigger allergies and asthma in sensitive individuals. Before the advent of Mold Dogs, mold could be tested for, but not pinpointed.

"The dog's ability as a tool is most effective because everything else out there right now can tell you, 'Yes, you have mold.' This is the only thing that can actually pinpoint the source, and so as a result it can reduce your remediation and

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repair costs. And currently, remediation costs are astronomical," said Mr. Earle.

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Mr. Earle began by working with a basement waterproofing company, Basement Doctor, before deciding to start his own business.

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"Lab Results LLC was formed out of frustration with the limitations of the existing tools that are available for people who want to perform indoor air quality inspections to find sources of hidden mold growth," Mr. Earle explained. "We [Basement Doctors] found that there was a tremendous amount of mold in people's basements and so we were doing mold remediation at the same time as waterproofing. People started calling us to find mold in the residential market and when we did the clean-up one of the things that would happen was sometimes people wanted testing done. Sometimes we found that we weren't getting all the mold out. The existing tools were truly limited."

On a tip from his girlfriend's mother, Mr. Earle decided to invest in a Mold Dog of his very own. "I don't have X-Ray eyes, but she has an X-Ray nose," noted Mr. Earle.

### **A Breed Apart**

Mold Dog is a registered trademark, and Oreo is one of only about 30 certified Mold Dogs in the United States, Mr. Earle said. She was trained by Bill Whitstine, at the Florida Canine Academy in Safety Harbor, Florida. Mr. Whitstine worked with Auburn University's canine detection sciences division to develop all of the protocols and training procedures for the dogs in order to maintain structure and order.

Mold dogs are considered scientific instruments by the Ninth Federal Appeals Court and Mr. Whitstine is the only person in the United States qualified to train and certify them. Though there are some who have gone out on their own to try their hand at "mold-dogging," only those dogs trained by Mr. Whitstine are technically qualified to do the job, hence the registered trademark, Mr. Earle said.

Oreo was due to be euthanized at an area humane shelter when Mr. Whitstine rescued her. He prized her intelligence and high level of energy — features that had previously caused her to get into trouble. According to Mr. Earle, Mr. Whitstine specifically goes to the Humane Society to look for dogs because he feels that mutts are often smarter and heartier than purebred dogs, especially because they lack many of the health problems unique to purebreds, such as the tendency to

hypertension in German Shepherds.

While growing up in West Windsor, Mr. Earle's family often adopted unwanted pets, such as an elderly horse and goat. He thus was at home with Oreo because she too, had been unwanted.

When she finds the mold, Oreo sits and then points to it with her nose. Particularly endearing according to Mr. Earle — though perhaps less so to owners hoping their mold problem is minimal — is Oreo's response in the presence of a significant amount of mold. When given the command to show the mold to Mr. Earle, she spins her head, creating a circle that encompasses the entire room. She then waits to be fed. After all, she thinks that it's a game and that Mr. Earle knew where the mold was all the time.

Mr. Earle calibrates Oreo every morning to make sure that she is still precise by hiding mold in plastic bags and placing the bags inside hidden walls in a mock basement that he uses to maintain her training. In order to keep her nose sensitive, Mr. Earle works only with minute amounts of mold. As of yet, Oreo has never been wrong, though Mr. Earle admits that he has no real way of knowing if she has found every bit of mold in the area.

"She's 100 percent at finding what she finds," he explained. According to Mr. Earle, Oreo has never yet indicated that mold was present when it was not. Even if the amount was so minimal that it couldn't be seen, Mr. Earle was able to take a sample of the problem area and find mold spores within it.

### **Growth of an Industry**

Water damage, not mold is the real problem.

"Mold is the buzz word," Mr. Earle explained. Thus, while it is important to remove mold, the only way to prevent it from forming is to keep homes well ventilated and dry, and to have any problem areas waterproofed. The EPA recommends that a professional contractor should be hired to deal with any visible mold exceeding ten square feet.

Women and children are two times more likely than males to be sensitized to mold, and the elderly and those recovering from injury or illness are also extremely prone to the symptoms that mold can cause, Mr. Earle noted. He added that in 1999 the Mayo Clinic concluded that 96 percent of chronic sinus infections are caused by fungus.

Mr. Earle views Lab Results and Oreo as a way to help people by performing a needed task that is difficult — and perhaps impossible — to do in any other way. "Lab Results gives me an opportunity to provide a service that nobody else can provide at this time in this area," he explained.

In keeping with this theme, for a limited time, Mr. Earle is offering to inspect elementary schools in Philadelphia, New York City, and New Jersey free of charge and with no obligation to use his remediation services. According to the EPA, water fountains, a commonality of any school, provide a premier environment for mold. Mr. Earle asks only that the public be notified that he is doing the inspection and that he can report his findings to the superintendent. To date there has only been one taker.

Mr. Earle believes that the lack of qualified inspectors has left a serious void. That void may very well soon have to be filled, which Mr. Earle thinks would make dogs like Oreo indispensable. Two bills have recently been introduced to the New Jersey Legislature concerning mold — one, if passed into law, would require homeowners to report any known mold hazards to any prospective buyers or renters. The latter party would then have ten days in which to conduct their own private investigation should they so desire.

The second bill would require the Department of Community Affairs to inspect condominiums and the common areas of any multiple dwellings for the presence of mold. These findings would be reported to the owner who would then be required to fix the problem, should one exist.

For now, Mr. Earle is looking to buy more dogs and to find more handlers to add to the two person Lab Results LLC team of him and his father in order to deal with the influx that he thinks is on its way. "I believe that there will be a time in the near future when people are looking for mold inspections and the first question they're going to ask is, 'So do you have a dog?'" he said.

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