



RENE JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR

Matthew Johnson, 37, is spending \$70,000 to clone his dog Woofie. The Whitchurch-Stouffville resident got serious about Woofie living another life about five years ago, after she helped him through a bout of bacterial meningitis.

Movie star pooch being cloned by grateful owner

BY LAURA BEESTON

Cats might have nine lives, but Matthew Johnson is hoping to give his dog two. Johnson, 37, is cloning his 20-year-old dog Woofie, with the assistance of a U.S. lab.

The Whitchurch-Stouffville resident got serious about Woofie living another life about five years ago, after she helped him through a bout of bacterial meningitis. "I made a commitment in my head at that point that I'm going to clone my dog," said Johnson, who lives in the community of Cedar Valley. "She pushed me through. "I was dying and in palliative care for months. I had to learn to walk, talk and was all messed up. She was the only reason I didn't kill myself or let go."

Johnson admits that when most people hear about the \$50,000 (USD) procedure they think it's not worth it. (He's paid the fees in full.)

He also acknowledges that, while it's true there are dogs in shelters in need, he's got a special bond with his own.

"I'm not going to get a rescue dog and hope it will be the same dog; I'm going to clone it," he said. "I'm connected to this dog. I've had her for 20 years."

Their story started when Johnson stumbled upon a garbage bag full of abandoned puppies while climbing a mountain in New Zealand. The only survivor of the "part dingo,

part shepherd" litter, Woofie, was three weeks old at the time. He took her home.

Over the course of her lifetime, Woofie has worked in search and rescue and was in the movie *Doggie Daycare*.

Johnson says he's using the money Woofie earned to pay for the cloning procedure and can't wait to "introduce Woofie to herself" in the estimated six to 12 months it takes to make her clone.

Dr. Surjit Jogar has been a veterinarian for 25 years and seen Woofie as a patient for the past six. He assisted Johnson in obtaining and FedExing her DNA samples — saliva, bloodwork and a skin biopsy — to an American lab where the cloning will proceed.

Dr. Surjit Jogar is a vet from Elgin Mills Animal Hospital who helped Matthew Johnson clone his dog, Woofie.

"They will make the clone from the skin biopsy, take out the genetic material from the cells and make a copy that will grow a pup," explained Jogar, who had never previously participated in an animal cloning procedure. "We're looking forward to seeing what it looks like in real life."

Jogar checked with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the College of Veterinarians of Ontario and the United States Department of Agriculture and found no prohibitive conditions against sending Woofie's sample across the border.

Then away she went. In biology, a "clone" refers to any organ-

ism whose genetic information is identical to that of a "mother" organism from which it was created, or an identical twin of a donor that is born at a later date, according to Alison Van Eenennaam, a specialist of animal biotechnology and genomics at the University of California, Davis.

"The last 20 years of my life with this dog have been good, we've had a lot of adventures and traveled the world. This is the next phase."

(UC Davis is a third-party lab that matches the DNA samples of pet clones.)

In animal biotechnology, donor cells are cultured from the biopsy sample (saliva, blood, skin) and transferred to a recipient egg. The cloned embryo is then transferred to a surrogate mother.

This cloning procedure, used largely for livestock, has been in the food supply now for over 20 years, according to Van Eenennaam. Most people also recall that "Dolly" the adult sheep was famously cloned by Scottish scientists in 1997.

Aug. 26, Johnson got confirmation from ViaGen Pets — "America's most trusted animal cloning company" — that they already have initial cell growth from Woofie's genetic material.

The company was formed in 2015. "The gestation for most canine breeds is less than 60 days and all puppies nurse for eight or nine weeks before being available for the client to take home," Blake Russell, ViaGen Pets president, said via email. Russell would not confirm if Woofie is the first Canadian dog to undergo this procedure, due to ViaGen Pets' "confidential relationship with each client."

Through parent company Trans Ova Genetics, the commercial cloning provider has supplied cloning services for livestock and equine for 12 years.

As for the ethics of cloning dogs and cats when shelters put down thousands of unwanted pets every year, Russell claimed "the number of cloned puppies produced per year is not having any measurable impact on the number of pets in shelters."

"Those who utilize our services also are often supporters and donors to shelters," he said.

Indeed, Johnson owns other shelter dogs — Owen, a pug schnauzer, and Benji, a husky shepherd, — but feels passionate about cloning Woofie regardless.

"I have a bond with my dog because of all that I went through," he said. "The last 20 years of my life with this dog have been good, we've had a lot of adventures and traveled the world. This is the next phase."

"It's just like going back in time."

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