

He just sold a biotech company for \$3.2 billion. But his puzzling venture into retail puppy sales is fueling controversy.

The former CEO's unusual side gig has sparked protests by animal rights activists who say his store sells dogs bred at so-called puppy mills.

By [Jonathan Saltzman](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 17, 2024, 18 minutes ago



Joanne Therrien of Dover, NH, center, and Joan O'Brien of Amherst, NH, right, were among a group of people protesting in early October on the street to the entrance of a strip mall that houses The Puppy Palace. JIM DAVIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Praveen Tipirneni achieved the dream of many biotech CEOs this summer when the Waltham drug company [he ran was acquired](#) for \$3.2 billion.

It marked the second time in a decade that a Massachusetts biotech he helped lead was bought by a pharmaceutical giant for billions of dollars.

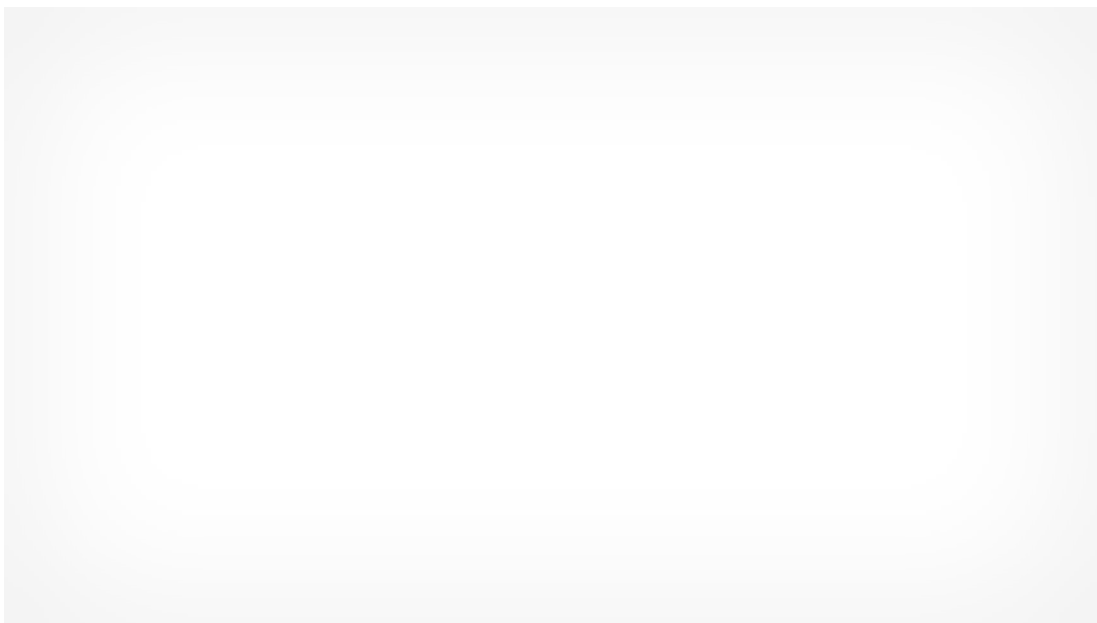
But a world away from biopharma, Tipirneni has made an improbable foray into retail puppy sales that has provoked protests by animal rights activists, including picketing twice outside his house in Lexington.

In May 2023, Tipirneni opened a Puppy Palace franchise in Manchester, N.H., that detractors say sells dogs bred at so-called puppy mills, large-scale commercial breeders with reputations for abuse, filthy conditions, and disease. Tipirneni said the store only works with the best breeders who share Puppy Palace's love of dogs.

Protesters from the New Hampshire Animal Rights League hold monthly demonstrations outside the shopping plaza where Puppy Palace of Manchester is located. One Saturday this month, 11 protesters held signs that included "Honk If You Hate Puppy Mills."

Last November, protesters twice stood outside Tipirneni's Lexington home with signs that said "R.I.P. Gus." Gus was a puppy they allege died at the store from inadequate care after a woman had made a down payment on the dog.

ADVERTISING





Joanne Therrien of Dover, NH, right, and Tracey Fitts of Weare, NH, left, were among a group of people protesting in October on the street to the entrance of a strip mall that houses The Puppy Palace. JIM DAVIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Puppy Palace was also denounced by a former employee who testified before two New Hampshire legislative committees in January to support a bill to ban the sale of dogs and cats by pet stores. Ellie Stariknok, who quit working as a kennel attendant in disgust after less than two weeks last year, told a Senate committee that dogs with hookworm and other parasites were sold to customers.

“They really didn’t see the dogs as animals or living beings,” Stariknok, now 19, said at the hearing. “They saw them as, ‘How much money can we make off each dog and how fast can we get them out the door so we can get another dog in here.’”

The Senate committee voted to study the bill further, while a House committee killed it.

Eight states have adopted such bans since 2017, including New York, Maine, and Vermont, but not Massachusetts, according to the Humane Society of the United States. Some 485 cities and towns nationwide, including Lexington, have also prohibited such sales.

Proponents of the bans contend that the commercial kennels where puppies are bred for stores are often inhumane, resembling factory farms. They say the puppies frequently catch diseases when they are transported in crowded trucks from kennels, many of which are located in the Midwest.

“We’re surprised that such an accomplished man would dabble in such a sordid business,” Joan O’Brien, president of the New Hampshire Animal Rights League and the organizer of the protests, recently said.

Tipirneni, who has a medical degree from McGill University and a master’s degree from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, said in a statement that he is “an investor” in the store. But a LinkedIn profile for Paul Tipirneni — Paul is his middle name — identified him as the owner and featured a head shot of him. The profile was recently taken down.



Praveen Tipirneni, then-CEO of Morpnic Rock Therapeutic, posed for a portrait in Waltham in 2016. JESSICA RINALDI

Tipirneni said the Puppy Palace is “the Apple of pet stores with the highest standards.” He said his expertise in medicine and pharmaceuticals had resulted in unparalleled care of the puppies.

Tipirneni declined to say what prompted him to pursue the venture after more than two successful decades in biopharma. Before he ran Waltham-based Morphic Therapeutic, which was bought by Eli Lilly, he was senior vice president of corporate development and global strategy at [Lexington-based Cubist Pharmaceuticals, which Merck bought in 2015 in a \\$9.5 billion deal.](#)

He declined to address questions about specific dogs and Stariknok’s allegations of poor care.

This is not the first time that Tipirneni’s extracurricular activities have stirred controversy. In 2019, [the Globe profiled him because he drew whimsical New Yorker-style cartoons about the biotech industry](#) and posted them online. A few days later, a reader contacted the Globe about a close resemblance between a Tipirneni drawing and a 1986 New Yorker cartoon.

[Tipirneni told the Globe that he didn’t deliberately copy The New Yorker cartoon](#) but acknowledged, “I think that one did stick in my mind.”

About 18 months ago, the Puppy Palace franchise opened in a strip mall on Manchester’s busiest commercial street.

The spiffy store features roughly 20 glass-covered display cases with puppies for sale — sometimes for \$3,000 or \$4,000 each. There were a variety of breeds the day of the recent protest, including an English springer spaniel, West Highland terrier, dachshund, and beagle.

The company’s website says the dogs come from breeders licensed by the US Department of Agriculture and are registered with or certified by a host of other organizations,

including the American Kennel Club.

At least five dogs at the store in early October came from large commercial breeders in the Midwest, according to a Globe review of the puppies' medical records and USDA identification numbers.

There is no legal definition of a puppy mill, and the New York-based American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals had no specifics about Tipirneni's store. But Jennie Lintz, senior director of the nonprofit's Puppy Mill Initiative, said in a statement that stores that sell puppies — a dwindling number nationwide — invariably rely on “cruel breeding operations that typically house hundreds of dogs in overcrowded, unsanitary cages for their entire breeding lives without adequate veterinary care, food, water and socialization.”

Two dachshunds seen by a Globe reporter at the store were bred by Sarah Causey, of S&R Sawmill Holler Kennel in Vanzant, Mo, according to the dogs' medical records shown by employees and the USDA numbers next to the dogs' windows. Her business was cited for violations after inspections by the Missouri Department of Agriculture in 2023 and 2021 and the USDA in 2020.

In the federal inspection, seven Labrador retriever puppies and two dachshund puppies were huddling together to keep warm in part of a building where the temperature was 42 degrees. Two adult dachshunds were in another area where the temperature was 40 degrees. The inspector also found dogs soiled with feces in enclosures that had not been cleaned.

The most recent federal inspection of Causey's kennel, in August 2023, found no lapses. However, John Goodwin, senior director for the Humane Society's Stop Puppy Mills campaign, said the sheer size of Causey's kennel at the time — 140 adult dogs and puppies — made it a puppy mill.

“That's a massive dog breeding operation,” said Goodwin.

Causey declined to discuss her kennel with the Globe.

Tipirneni said in his statement that Puppy Palace would look into the violations at Causey's kennel and "would never condone such treatment or work with such people."

The Humane Society and the ASPCA recommend that people adopt dogs or visit responsible breeders rather than buy puppies from stores.



Linda Dionne of Raymond, N.H., was among a group of people protesting on the street to the entrance of a strip mall that houses The Puppy Palace, alongside her dog Bella. JIM DAVIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Stariknok, who testified before the legislative committees, said she began working as a kennel attendant soon after Puppy Palace opened and met Tipirneni several times when he visited. When the first group of 28 dogs arrived, she said, they seemed healthy. But within days, she said, more than half of them had parasites, although they received some medicine. She said the store still sold them.

When a Maltese puppy, Alex, seemed seriously ill one night, Stariknok said, management didn't call a veterinarian until the next day, despite her pleas. She said the dog nearly died.

Derek DuBois, a medical administrative assistant in North Andover, said he bought a 4-month-old Siberian husky called Chili from Puppy Palace in August 2023 for \$2,000.

Within two days, DuBois said, Chili collapsed, had trouble breathing, and struggled to stand. The dog also had gray gums and diarrhea and was vomiting.

DuBois took Chili to a veterinary hospital, where he was diagnosed with elevated liver values and an inflamed gastrointestinal tract, DuBois said. Medical records he shared said the dog either had an allergic reaction or was exposed to something toxic.



The exterior of The Puppy Palace. JIM DAVIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Chili survived, but his treatment cost \$4,300, which DuBois requested Tipirneni reimburse him for in an email and certified letter.

“I absolutely believe The Puppy Palace sold me a sick dog,” he wrote.

Tipirneni never replied, DuBois said, but the store manager called DuBois and said Puppy Palace wouldn't reimburse him because there was no proof that Chili was sick upon leaving the store.

Several people testified against the bills to ban retail sales of dogs, including Stacey Ober, the American Kennel Club's New England government relations manager. Her group says in a position paper that bans "assume that all dogs sold at pet stores have been raised in poor conditions, which is simply not accurate."

Rep. Judy Aron, chair of the House Environment and Agriculture Committee, which rejected the proposed ban as anti-business, told the Globe that the protesters were misguided and should picket outside large commercial kennels, not local stores.

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