

These puppies may be Maryland's first cloned dogs, and superheroes in their own right

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A Bel Air woman loves her long-haired chihuahua so much that she paid a Texas animal cloning company \$50,000 so that her dog—or a version of him—will be at her side forever.

Five puppies who are genetically identical to the dog, named Bruce Wayne, were born in October and thrived. Four went to live with Bruce and his owner, Meesha Kauffman, while the fifth lives now with a friend of Kauffman's in Baltimore.

"I was expecting one puppy or maybe two," Kauffman said. "When I heard that five puppies were born, I thought, 'Wow, I hit the jackpot. Having five dogs has definitely been a lifestyle change. But goodness, they bring me so much joy I can't imagine parting with any of them now."

ViaGen is the only animal cloning company in the U.S. to clone pets in addition to livestock, according to Melain Rodriguez, the company's client service manager.

Since expanding from livestock into pet cloning more than two years ago, ViaGen has cloned more than 100 pets, Rodriguez said, and more than half are [dogs](#). Though the chihuahua pups aren't the first cloned pets to live in Maryland—Rodriguez said the company has previously cloned cats for Free State residents—they are the company's first cloned

canines in the state.

Despite the expense (\$50,000 for a dog and \$25,000 for a cat) Rodriguez said the practice has become increasingly popular since singer Barbra Streisand revealed in February that she'd had her 14-year-old dog, a Coton du Tulear named Samantha. Currently, Rodriguez said, there's a lengthy waiting list to have Fido or Fluffy cloned.

"The demand is very high," she said, "and it's growing."

Cloning involves a process called "nuclear transfer," and Rodriguez explained it like this:

A veterinarian removed a 4-millimeter piece of Bruce Wayne's skin, and it was shipped to Texas. Scientists at ViaGen took the sample, performed a culturing procedure and grew millions of live cells. An egg was then withdrawn from the surrogate "mom—in this case a beagle—and the nucleus was removed. The remainder of the beagle's egg was fused with the cultured cells, embryos started to grow and they were implanted into the beagle. After a normal gestation period, the beagle gave birth on Oct. 26 to the litter of five puppies.

Kauffman is the 35-year-old woman behind the Instagram account, [ipartywithbrucewayne](#), which now has 60,400 followers. She said she started thinking about having the procedure done shortly after adopting Bruce, now 4 years old, as a five-month-old puppy.

"I have a connection with Bruce Wayne that goes deeper than with any pet I've ever had," she said. "He's very calming. He's my best friend, and he travels everywhere with me."

But at the time, the only pet cloning that Kauffman could find was being done in South Korea. In addition to the expense, other practical

considerations, including the lengthy quarantine time required to bring animals into the U.S., dissuaded Kauffman. So when she heard that ViaGen had started cloning animals in the U.S., she jumped at the chance.

Just as the parent dog, Bruce Wayne, is named after Batman, Kauffman has given her pups superhero names: Clark Kent (Superman), Peter Parker (Spiderman), Wade Wilson (Deadpool) and Tony Stark (Iron Man).

Rodriguez said ViaGen cautions prospective clients that while the company can guaranty a clone that's genetically identical to the parent, personalities are a complicated mix of nature and nurture. But usually, she said, any differences in animal character traits are subtle.

"Breeders have known for a long time that temperament is a heritable trait," she said. "Environmental factors do play a role. But while we really don't know how much of our personality is determined by our genetics, there's probably a bigger correlation than we once thought."

Kauffman said that her puppies express individual traits—Wade Wilson is their angry puppy, while jealous Clark Kent always wants whichever toy his litter mates are playing with. Peter Parker is sweet, while Tony Stark is calm and laid-back.

"They're not robotic copies of Bruce Wayne, but they're more like him than they're different," Kauffman said. "They're always doing something that makes me stop and say: 'Oh my God, that's exactly what Bruce would have done.' "

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