

CONTENTS

NEWS »

- [Top Stories](#)
- [Express Checkout](#)
- [Point of View](#)
- [Cover Story](#)

ARTS »

- [Music A-Side](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Local Music](#)
- [CD Reviews](#)
- [Todd Hyman. . .](#)
- [Movie Reviews](#)
- [Book Review](#)

LIFESTYLE »

- [The Nelson Ravings](#)
- [Amy Fisher-The Column](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Mega Bites](#)
- [Home](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Turning Points](#)
- [Pets](#)
- [Fashion](#)
- [Body, Mind & Spirit](#)
- [Parenting](#)
- [The Fox Hunt](#)
- [True Crime](#)
- [Sports](#)

LISTINGS

- [Do This](#)
- [Personals](#)
- [HOME](#)
- [ARCHIVE](#)

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NEWS

The Mold Hunters: LI Pol Says New Industry Needs Rules
 By Lauren E. Hill

GARDEN CITY—Mold can be hiding in any moist spot in your home or workplace, secretly growing. Some say that if it's one of a few strains of toxic mold, it could cause allergies, asthma attacks, increased susceptibility to colds and flu, and have negative effects when ingested, touched or inhaled.



Toxic mold has become a headline-grabbing, lawsuit-making issue in recent years, with schoolchildren getting nosebleeds (allegedly from the growing green stuff) and homeowners winning multi-million-dollar settlements for moldy homes. According to the Insurance Information Institute, industry losses to mold were some \$9 billion in 2001, and while Texas is "ground zero" for mold claims, insurers also blame mold for a major rise, from \$286.6 million to \$430.6 million, in water-related damage claims in California. But mold has made its mark here, too. A *Daily News* headline last September spoke of "killer mold." New York landlords are now instituting "mold clauses."

Along with the fear (or hysteria), an industry of detectors and removers has been spawned. Manny Marinos, owner of Homeguard Home Inspections in Hauppauge conducts about 20 mold inspections a year. He is certified by a lab to collect air samples of homes with a pump to find mold, which he then has tested. He charges customers between \$250 and \$300 for each inspection, which consumes a couple of hours.

But there are no standards to become a licensed mold detector in New York State—or any other state besides California, for that matter. Now, Senator Carl Marcellino (R-Syosset) is pushing legislation to create regulations for mold investigators. "There is no mold expert, it's not like a real-estate broker," says Kathy Wilson, a spokesperson for Marcellino.

There is, however, at least one mold-sniffing expert: "Oreo," a 1-year-old Labrador mix. She's the Northeast's only certified "Mold Dog," working with her owner/handler Jason Earle through Lab Results LLC. "[Oreo is] my partner, my pet and my best friend," says Earle, 27, a mold inspector certified by the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification, in Vancouver, WA. Oreo alerts Earle that mold is lurking by pointing to it with her nose. Earle then takes samples to be analyzed at a lab.

This New Jersey-based tandem is certified by the Florida Canine Academy, which has also trained termite-detection dogs (www.LabResultsLLC.com). Bill Whitstine, certified master trainer at the academy in Florida (where the

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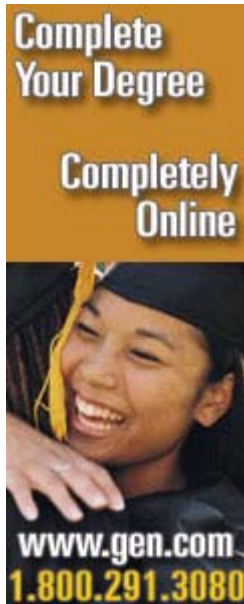
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damp air makes mold especially pernicious), saw the growing problem of mold, and researched and developed a training program for canines to detect it. Three months ago, Oreo was one of the Academy's graduates.

Earle and Oreo will inspect kindergarten through sixth grade schools in New Jersey, New York and Philadelphia free of charge. "I've got sort of a personal mission here to help reduce some of the pollutants that make these problems worse," Earle says, mentioning that he was asthmatic as a child and remembers how frightening an attack was. "There's nothing that bothers me more than a scared child." He already has one client on Long Island, a huge hotel he cannot name.

Marcellino's proposed bill resembles a 2002 California Law, also called the Toxic Mold Protection Act and, to date, the only one of its kind. Under the legislation, the California Department of Health Services is mandated to assess health threats from molds, find methods of identifying and sampling fungi, and provide guidance for removal, among other tasks. New York's bill is waiting to be brought to a vote.

[BACK TO TOP](#) ↗

[CLASSIFIEDS](#) [PERSONALS](#) [ABOUT](#) [DISTRIBUTION](#) [MEDIA KIT](#) [CONTACT US](#)

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