



TO PROTECT AND SERVE

Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association honors vets with a mission ■ by ARNA COHEN

They've dispensed free care to thousands of animals in rural and underserved areas, stood up for puppy mill dogs in Missouri, persuaded veterinary schools to eliminate lethal practice surgeries on animals, helped achieve tremendous legal gains for farm animals in California, assisted with animal rescue following Haiti's earthquake, and conducted veterinary training clinics in developing countries.

Separately, these activities represent the wide-ranging interests of the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association's 3,500 members. Together, they illustrate what drives these compassionate veterinary professionals: the desire to be an active voice for animals.

The creation of HSVMA in 2008 melded the community outreach of The HSUS's Rural Area Veterinary Services program with the advocacy tenets of the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights. HSVMA provides a professional home for veterinarians, students, and technicians who believed the American Veterinary Medical Association and similar organizations did not offer opportunities to work for animal welfare on a broader scale.

AVMA does provide some resources, such as insurance, that HSVMA is still developing, says Pam Runquist, HSVMA's director

of veterinary advocacy. "We do stress that they can belong to both," she says, "and that by coming with us, they're showing their support of promoting animal protection."

Each year, HSVMA bestows two awards—Direct Practitioner of the Year and Veterinary Advocate of the Year—to honor members who carry out the organization's mission to protect and promote animal welfare. Choosing from a pool of outstanding submissions was not an easy task. "We had a really high caliber of nominations to pick from" for 2010, says Runquist. "It was difficult for the staff and board to identify who the winners were."

Ultimately, two stood out: Dr. Lori Pasternak, whose commitment to pet health led her to create a low-cost surgical practice with an unusual business model, and Dr. Brian Forsgren, who dove unhesitatingly into the effort to improve the lives of factory farm animals in Ohio, despite a heavy caseload at his inner city clinic.

HSVMA honored the recipients during The HSUS's Animal Care Expo held this May in Florida—publicity that Runquist hopes will inspire even more nominations for next year: "Other veterinarians hear about what these vets have done, and it motivates them to get involved in their own communities."



HSVMA Veterinary Advocate of the Year

Who he is: *Dr. Brian Forsgren; Gateway Animal Clinic; Cleveland, Ohio*

How long he's been in practice: *34 years*

Thoughts on being a vet: *"It [requires] a deep sense of integrity and true empathy for the human-animal bond. The work, the job never ends. There are no days off."*

Why he won: *On top of running a busy clinic with many pro bono services, Forsgren is a fierce advocate for farm animals in his state.*

By the time Dr. Brian Forsgren sat down and put his feet up one Friday evening in June, 115 clients had passed through his Cleveland, Ohio, practice in 5 ½ hours. Gateway Animal Clinic sees pets on a first-come, first-served basis, and the veterinarians never know what the day will bring. "We take care of anybody who shows up," says the practitioner of 30-plus years. "It's very interesting, but interesting can also be exhausting."

While Gateway's clients represent the entire economic spectrum, its inner city location means that many have little money, and Forsgren has dedicated his career to ensuring that Cleveland's low-income communities can get affordable, high-quality care for their pets. One of his cases that June day was a family who'd been at the emergency vet hospital since the wee hours seeking care for their dog, who'd been shot. "They were pretty tired and they were out of money. So I just said, 'Come on in. I'll take care of this. You guys pay me someday.'"

In the midst of these grueling days, Forsgren has somehow managed to make time for animal advocacy on other fronts, earning numerous awards from state veterinary organizations for his efforts on behalf of animal shelters and small animal medicine. "He's so well-respected in Cleveland and statewide," says Karen Minton, HSUS Ohio state director. "He's always gone above and beyond normal veterinary practice."

When The HSUS launched its campaign to place a farm animal welfare initiative on the Ohio ballot in 2010, Forsgren was one of the first veterinarians to stand up for the measure, which proposed phasing out extreme forms of confinement on factory farms. To him, advocacy is a professional obligation. "If you're a pediatrician and child abuse is going on, wouldn't you get on board?" he says. "The world is looking to veterinary medicine as the answer to some of the horrible stuff that's going on, particularly to animals. ... It seemed a logical extension that when The HSUS called and ask me to help on this [initiative], given the atrocities that were going on, that the profes-

sion should stand up and do something."

Forsgren gained support from veterinary colleagues throughout the state, strengthening credibility for the ballot as he represented "the compassion of someone who cares about animals but who can also back it with his credentials," says Minton. He also placed petitions in his clinic's lobby and invited signature gatherers to speak with waiting clients. People who walk into veterinary offices are "a sleeping giant of animal advocacy," he says. "With the kind of traffic that I have, it seemed a good way to support [the initiative]."

While the ballot battle never materialized—preempted by an agreement between state officials and Ohioans for Humane Farms—Forsgren's wholehearted participation in the campaign garnered him another well-earned honor, recognition as HSVMA's Veterinary Advocate of the Year. And he's already thinking about his next challenge: exposing new graduates to high-volume clinics that help clients of all income levels. "Brian is the man," says Paul Shapiro, HSUS senior director of farm animal protection. "People look to veterinarians to be leaders on animal welfare issues, and Brian Forsgren epitomizes what that leadership should look like."



HSVMA Direct Practitioner of the Year

Who she is: Dr. Lori Pasternak; Helping Hands Affordable Veterinary Surgical and Dental Care clinic; Richmond, Va.

How long she's been in practice: 14 years

Thoughts on being a vet: "Pets bring out such intense passion in people, and I get to experience that wonderful emotion from both people and pets every day. It's an amazing 'feel good' job."

Why she won: Pasternak's unique business model combines low-cost surgeries with community service for animals.



Young chefs just starting out don't make much money, and when Nathan Stickel was faced with a \$4,000 bill to patch up his young cat, who'd tussled with a dog, he feared his only option would be putting Maggie to sleep. "I didn't ... have \$4,000 to my name," says the Richmond, Va., resident. "They wanted me to pay it all up front. I said, 'I can't do that.'"

Then Stickel heard about Dr. Lori Pasternak, a Richmond veterinarian whose surgery- and dentistry-only clinic, Helping Hands, charges fixed rates that are a small fraction of standard fees. The cost of sewing up Maggie's torn skin would come to only a few hundred dollars, but even that amount was difficult for Stickel after covering a few nights of care for Maggie at the emergency hospital and his regular vet.

So Pasternak made him an offer he couldn't refuse: If he agreed to volunteer for 20 hours at a local animal welfare organization, the

total would be cut in half. Stickel was ecstatic. Maggie came out as good as new, and the chef happily spent 20 hours cleaning kennels and socializing dogs at the Richmond Animal Care and Control shelter.

The money to subsidize Maggie's operation came from the clinic's "good citizenship" fund. Five dollars from each procedure performed is deposited into the account; if a client can't afford the clinic's bare-bones fee for a lifesaving surgery, the fund is tapped to pay for it. "For every \$10 we give them, they owe an hour of community service to either us or any animal rescue organization where they live," says Pasternak.

Her motivation for creating the clinic was originally a selfish one, Pasternak says. Her talent and interest lay in surgery—not in "dealing with finances and trying to be a salesperson"—and she preferred a position that would enable her to do only that. While helping out at a local low-cost spay/neuter clinic, it dawned on her that nothing similar existed for more advanced surgeries. "A light bulb went off that I could have a job where I could do just surgeries and do it like a low-cost spay/neuter clinic," she says.

Pasternak keeps costs down by eliminating office visits and consultations and relying on clients' full-service veterinarians to provide pre- and post-op care. There are only four paid staff members; volunteers help clean, do laundry, and monitor animals as they awake from anesthesia, freeing the staff to focus on procedures.

With their donations of money and time, community members have embraced the clinic "beyond my wildest dreams," Pasternak says. For "probably 85 percent of the volunteers ... we've never touched their pets. They come because they ... believe in what we do and they just want to be part of it."

The clinic's unique model has also garnered attention from local news media, National Public Radio, and *Good Morning America*. And the recognition from HSVMA as Direct Practitioner of the Year "really confirmed my belief in what I'm doing," she says. "... I continue to do what I do because I love it so much, but to be recognized for it is just absolutely humbling and amazing."



Leading the Way

HSVMA's Leadership Council gives animals a voice



As long as she can remember, veterinarian Holly Cheever has felt compelled to save lives and prevent suffering. At age 4, she sabotaged her father's fishing trips by returning the flopping, just-caught fish to the water when her dad wasn't looking. Five years later, she was sneaking out of her house before dawn and walking a mile to the Cape Cod Canal to dismantle duck hunting blinds built along the shore.

Compassion for all species led Cheever to veterinary school followed by a position working with dairy cows in upstate New York. But she often felt like an outsider within her profession. "Back in the day, my colleagues did not embrace [animal advocacy], so it did not endear me to many of [them]."

Undaunted, Cheever became the first member of the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights in 1981; nearly three

decades later, she helped shepherd the group's rebirth as the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association, an HSUS affiliate. Today, in addition to running a busy practice in Voorheesville, N.Y., she serves as vice president of the New York State Humane Association, works with law enforcement to investigate and prosecute cruelty cases, and chairs the HSVMA's Leadership Council.

The council consists of 20 advisers who help shape the organization's direction: veterinarians and technicians with a variety of backgrounds, from companion animal practitioners to specialists in wildlife, animal behavior, equines, and shelter medicine. What brings them together is the desire to make animal welfare a central focus of veterinary medicine. In turn, their combined expertise ensures there's a strong professional voice promoting animals' best interests. On issues ranging from horse

slaughter to animal husbandry to cosmetic surgeries on pets, council members testify before state and federal legislators, speak to local veterinary chapters, hold presentations for veterinary students, and more.

They're also mentoring a growing cadre of veterinary professionals who want to combat animal abuse at all levels, whether by speaking out against farm animal cruelty or by advising clients not to declaw their pet cats. HSVMA is "an option for vets and techs to be part of a medical association that really reflects what they believe in terms of animal welfare," says HSVMA council member and veterinary technician Maya Key, a program manager with the Rocky Mountain Alley Cat Alliance in Denver, Colo.

Many members have felt frustrated by the policies of the American Veterinary Medical Association, which has too often sided with the agribusiness and pharmaceutical industries to the detriment of animals, says HSVMA's Pam Runquist. But attitudes within the profession are evolving. "We're either going to see more veterinarians and technicians joining HSVMA because it reflects their views and beliefs," says Key, "or we're going to see AVMA changing more to reflect the views of its constituents."

To help foster this evolution of attitudes, Cheever continues to grow HSVMA's ranks by reaching out to veterinary students across the nation. "[We need to] show pupils that there is a welfare-friendly organization ... ready, willing, and able to embrace them and support them," she says, "... [so] that they don't feel, as my generation did, that we were really the outcasts and lepers of the veterinary world for ... wanting to protect animals from abuse." ■

Veterinarian Holly Cheever nestles up to Levi at her Voorheesville, N.Y., sanctuary.



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