



HELPING HANDS

I'VE HAD 10 DOGS, numerous foster dogs, three horses and two cats. Each time I changed states, for school or for jobs, I was forced to change veterinarians – and each time, it was agonizing. For many of us with animals, our veterinarian is as important to us as our general practitioner. We depend on them not only for their skill and expertise in treating our pets, but for their compassion. Here, meet three Chattanooga veterinarians whose compassion has led them not just to vet school, but to also have a hand in the nonprofit animal rescue world.

CLAWS AND PAWS MOBILE VET SERVICES AND COMPASSION COPPER CANYON

When Dr. Shannon Dawkins was on an undergraduate study abroad semester in Mexico, she fell in love with the country. She also became aware of the plight of the animals in the more remote regions.

After undergraduate school, she decided to move to Mexico. She lived in a small fishing village on the Baja Peninsula, learning Spanish from the locals with a dictionary at her side. A year and a half later, she entered vet school at Ross University on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts, followed by clinicals at Auburn University.

"I had a special interest in shelter medicine and exotics and did an externship in each," she says.

Dawkins moved to Chattanooga in 2010 and started Claws and Paws Mobile Veterinary Services in 2013. "We are primarily a mobile house call service for dogs, cats, exotics: birds, reptiles, pocket pets, rabbits and wildlife. We have a mobile surgical unit as well as X-ray. I practice conventional medicine as well as integrative, including acupuncture, Chinese herbals, nutritional supplements and therapeutic laser."

In 2017, she and her husband traveled to Copper Canyon in the Sierra Madre of Chihuahua, Mexico, to watch an ultra marathon race and do some overnight hiking and camping. It was a transformative trip.

"Copper Canyon is the site of some of the most rugged mountains and canyons of Mexico. It is remote and quite challenging to get to. Some towns require 4-wheel drive or are only accessible by foot, and the closest vet services are eight hours away," she says. "We left knowing that we wanted to come back and do something to help the animals."

Dawkins and her husband spoke to the local government officials to be certain they had their full support to come in and offer spay/neuter services.

"Sadly, no one else was doing anything for the animals there. For many of the smaller towns, even the human doctor only comes once a month. The



WANT TO GET INVOLVED?
Compassion Copper (compassioncoppercanyon.org) has multiple fun and interesting ways one can get involved locally and in Mexico. Follow the Compassion Copper Canyon Facebook page for opportunities and updates.

SHANNON DAWKINS POSES FOR A PORTRAIT WITH HER DOGS, REESES, TREVOR AND PRENTICE.

local governments were excited that we wanted to come," she says.

Her nonprofit, Compassion Copper Canyon, received its 501(c)(3) status two years later, in May 2019. As of January of this year, a total of 353 animals have been spayed or neutered, with 159 animals treated for worms, fleas and ticks or receiving vaccinations, bringing the total to 512 animals that have been helped.

Along with low-cost or free spay and neuter, Dawkins and her team provide basic veterinary care whenever possible. They treat primarily dogs and cats but have been known to also treat a few goats and a donkey. They have even been involved in a Christmas clothing and toy drive for one of the towns.

"People walk out of the mountains up to two hours to come and get these much-needed gifts," Dawkins says.

"The goal is to eventually set up a permanent [vet clinic] in Copper Canyon. Currently, we operate our clinic out of schools or other local buildings."

Their primary means of fundraising is through online silent auctions and the sale of T-shirts, Dawkins says, and they are always looking for volunteers to help.

"Locally, we need help organizing donated medical supplies. For people who want to travel to Mexico, we are in need of anyone with animal/vet clinic experience, and also volunteers who are bilingual, photographers and people to help with setup and breakdown of the clinics," she says.

PHOTO BY TROY STOLT

CAT CLINIC OF CHATTANOOGA AND THE ALICE FUND

Dr. Marcia Toumayan opened the Cat Clinic of Chattanooga in April 2008. A Scenic City native, she had attended college at UTC, obtained her veterinary degree from the University of Georgia, and then, due to family obligations, returned to Chattanooga.

Having enjoyed working in an all-feline practice in Charlotte, North Carolina — and since there were no cats-only veterinary practices in Chattanooga — she felt it was her "calling" to open the Cat Clinic.

"I feel that cats have frequently been undervalued and underserved by society in general, and even by the veterinary community," she says. "This is changing and there are now several hundred feline-exclusive practices around the country. In the setting of a cats-only practice, my staff and I can help provide for the medical needs of our patients — which are sometimes quite different from those of dogs or other companion animals — while also respecting their temperament and individual cat characters in a (usually!) quiet and low-stress setting."

In addition to her busy cat practice, Toumayan is the medical advisor of a nonprofit called The Alice Fund. The fund, named for a feral cat named Alice, started in 2008 with a donation jar on the reception desk of Toumayan's clinic. It received 501(c)(3) status in 2014 with Kathy Allison at the helm as president.

"In veterinary practice, we are frequently faced with clients who want to provide for their animal companions' medical needs but can't really afford to do so," Toumayan says. "On the other side of this equation are clients who are aware of that need and have the means and desire to help. The mission of The Alice Fund is to bring these two together so that those who want to help can do so with confidence that their donations are being used wisely to help those truly in need."

"My role as medical advisor of The Alice Fund is part medical triage and part traffic direction. As requests for help are submitted via the fund's



WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

Visit thealicefund.org for how to donate. Or, you can drop off merchandise for the clinic to sell at the Cat Clinic of Chattanooga, located at 310 Cherokee Blvd. on the North Shore.

DR. MARCIA TOUMAYAN POSES WITH GUS.

online application, the board decides whether there is true need and whether the fund has the available resources to help. If the applicant does not already have an established relationship with a veterinarian, I can perform the initial physical exam and assessment at the Cat Clinic, and then either provide the needed medical care for the cat patient or direct The Alice Fund recipient to another practice or resource that can best fill the need in the most financially responsible manner. We have many veterinary partners in the local community who work with the fund and, in most cases, provide discounted veterinary services to Alice Fund recipients. We also work closely with the Veterinary Care and Specialty Group for emergency cases, and with ChattaNeuter for low-

cost spay/neuter needs."

In addition, The Alice Fund provides money for vaccines for kittens, helps acutely ill cats obtain emergency services, and helps make older cats' senior years as comfortable and healthy as possible. It also maintains a small pantry stocked with donated food and kitty litter.

Everything The Alice Fund does is supported by donations. More than 300 cats were helped in 2019.

In addition to accepting donations at the Cat Clinic, Toumayan has created a merchandise area within the clinic where clients can shop for cat-related goodies. All proceeds from merchandise sales go to The Alice Fund. The fund also hosts an annual online fundraiser called the FurBall each year on National Hairball Awareness Day.

PHOTO BY C.B. SCHMELTER



DR. BILLY AND CLAUDIA PULLEN



DAISY

WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

You can make a donation in the memory of a pet or a person at daisystale.org. Donations can also be mailed to Daisy's Tale, c/o Mary Cook, 3800 St. Elmo Ave., Suite 306, Chattanooga, TN 37409.

VETERINARY CLINIC AND SPECIALTY GROUP AND DAISY'S TALE

Dr. Billy Pullen and his wife, Claudia, opened Veterinary Clinic and Specialty Group in St. Elmo in September 2016. Dr. Pullen's first patient at the clinic was Daisy, a beautiful black Lab with soulful brown eyes and multiple health issues. She belonged to Mary Cook, VCSG's community outreach coordinator.

Two years later, Daisy died at age 16 1/2. At her side were Cook, Dr. Pullen, and the numerous vet techs who had cared for her and come to love her.

The following year, Dr. Pullen gave Cook an envelope. Inside was the paperwork for "Daisy's Tale," a nonprofit, naming Mary as president. Its

mission would be twofold: "To provide loving medical care for pets in need, and to provide continuing education for those who serve them." Dr. Pullen would serve as medical advisor.

In the short time since its inception, Daisy's Tale has already covered the cost of medical care for several animals in the Chattanooga community. And through the support of generous community sponsors, the nonprofit has been able to host VCSG's annual continuing education conference completely free of charge as an outreach to the veterinary community in and around Chattanooga.

"The conference," Pullen says, "is part of our commitment to main-

taining a high level of accessibility and excellence in veterinary medicine." It brings in top experts in the various veterinary medicine specialties to speak, and has grown from 12 to 80 attendees (standing room only!) in just three years. "We can't overstate the impact of such a high-level conference — offered for free to area vets — on the community," adds Pullen.

While VCSG and Daisy's Tale are separate entities, they work hand-in-hand to help pets in the Chattanooga area. Owners in need of veterinary medical assistance do not have to be clients of VCSG and can apply directly to Daisy's Tale for help. www.daisystale.org

PHOTO BY ROBIN RUDD

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