

Technically, Amazing

Every year, the middle of October marks Vet Tech Appreciation Week. Vet techs, alternately known as veterinary nurses, are a critical component of the veterinary medical field- the foundation without which the industry would crumble. While doctors may be prescribing and doing surgeries – techs are doing...everything else. Techs are highly skilled in a number of areas, from radiology, anesthesia, emergency medicine, pharmacy, phlebotomy...the list goes on. Not to mention that their patients aren't always, well, patient. That means their skill extends to understanding animal behavior and handling, including a large amount of physical labor.

In turn, sanctuaries cannot function without strong ties to veterinary medicine. Skilled veterinary professionals are needed to provide high quality care to residents, and it is often techs who are the first line of defense when it comes to patient care.

That is why it is exceedingly special when some technicians go one step further, using their skills and knowledge to propel them into sanctuary work – bringing with them a wealth of knowledge benefitting the animals in their care. A number of GFAS-certified sanctuaries were founded by vet techs. We stopped to talk to Kelly Lapham of Accredited Black Dawg Farm and Sanctuary in Washington about how vet tech life transformed and informed sanctuary life for her.

GFAS: How did being a vet tech lead you to found an animal sanctuary? What's your backstory?

Kelly: Wow, good one! I have a blended background of business, management marketing and veterinary experience. I felt confident with my veterinary experience that following this dream was a good way to give back and be of service to the animals in our community. If I didn't know something and felt unable to handle an issue I knew I had many professionals to reach out to and lean on.

I knew from the age of nine that I wanted to have a sanctuary, I had seen a PBS special about Green Chimneys that brought together children and abused/unwanted animals. Like many little girls that age I also wanted to be an artist and a veterinarian. I worked for nearly 15 years in small animal medicine, the last three in specialty/emergency practice. I grew up on a farm as well.

GFAS: What skills have you found most useful to your sanctuary work?

Kelly: All of my medical skills from my veterinary career are used here on a daily basis, from assessment, triage if needed, treating long term cases through supportive care to running fecals and other lab related studies. Probably another unmentioned but important aspect of both fields is that of compassion burnout. The veterinary field is well aware and has many resources available to people. The sanctuary industry not as much yet.

GFAS: How have your skills built capacity for the organization?

Kelly: In a lot of ways, we are able to save on veterinary costs by doing a lot of supportive care ourselves versus sending into a 24/7 hospital. In running a sanctuary, every penny is crucial, so wherever we can save money but yet provide the best care is critical. Something as simple as running inhouse fecals frequently in order to monitor herd health is very beneficial, allowing us to divert much needed funds elsewhere.

GFAS: Were there things you were never taught as a tech and had to learn on the job?

Kelly: This is a loaded question, there is so much to learn in both industries and trying to keep apprised of current medical conditions and trends for all of the animals is ongoing and is imperative to a sanctuary keeping its residents healthy. I am always learning on a daily basis, whether its animal care, business trends (yes, sanctuaries need to be run as a business), local and state tax laws and accounting. I hate QuickBooks by the way, if you can-hire someone reputable to do the books, do so. Obviously, there are so many other items one needs to learn in order to be successful at creating and running a sanctuary.

GFAS: What has your experience been with the veterinary field as a sanctuary operator? Are they helpful/receptive, knowledgeable?

Kelly: I will tell you after the vet comes out today (on a Friday afternoon emergency) with three horses suddenly having three different issues. For those that don't know, vets hate having Friday afternoon emergencies. None of these of which I can "fix". Personally, it depends on the veterinarian and the instance. There are several which are great doctors but have terrible "bed-side manner". The veterinary field is really struggling right now, so seeing a vet in a timely manner can be difficult as they have so many more demands upon their time.

GFAS: How can techs get more involved in the sanctuary movement?

Kelly: VOLUNTEER YOUR TIME! Help sanctuaries that maybe aren't familiar with putting together care plans, how to plan for and implement protocols, help them to learn skills and gain knowledge and how to be good animal stewards. I could go on ad nauseum.

GFAS: What's one thing you wish people knew about being a tech?

Kelly: It's extremely stressful and we don't do it for the money because there isn't much to be made in the veterinary industry, respectively.

This week, October 16-22, we ask you to show some love to the vet techs and animal caregivers you know. Just as Kelly suggests, their compensation can rarely match the physical and emotional toll they take on, as they provide a critical service to the animals we all love.

If your sanctuary could use more help with caregiving or medical care, consider reaching out to local vet tech student chapters or the [HSVMA](#) to connect with skilled professionals who may contribute to the sanctuary movement.

To learn more about the amazing work of Black Dawg Farm & Sanctuary, check this out!

<https://youtu.be/J4V26n69-VY>

We extend a heartfelt thank you to Kelly Lapham of Black Dawg Farm & Sanctuary for her time in contributing to this piece.