

Mission Meow: Giving Feline-Centric Groups the Funding to Make Their Dreams Come True

A Special Interview With Sally Williams

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker and today Sally, who is a Game Changer nominee has, who was nominated by Karen, is joining me to talk more about the amazing work she's doing for rescues. We're so thankful that Karen did nominate Sally, and we're also thankful that Sally has taken some time this morning to join me so we can all learn more about what she's doing. Sally, congratulations on your Game Changer award, and thank you for joining me.

Sally Williams:

I am so honored. Thank you so much. I am rarely at a loss for words, but when I got the email, I was definitely at loss for words. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you and have your audience hear more about Mission Meow.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, I know a little bit about what you're doing and I know this is one of many things you've done in the space of rescue and helping animals live the very best lives they can. But Sally, back up and tell our readers and listeners a little bit more about the inspiration behind your most recent work.

Sally Williams:

Okay, I'll just go way back to the beginning. I mean, a lifelong animal lover, became a cat sitter, studied, became a behaviorist, then started speaking at conventions and then I founded and ran a nonprofit called The Brodie Fund. And I would say I was somebody who had never done that before. I had volunteered for organizations, but I had a cat that was diagnosed with cancer and I spent a lot of time in vet practices, vet offices, lots of appointments, and I always waited. I always sat in the room. I wanted to be there when Brodie came out or be there if they had any questions. And I heard a lot of conversations and a lot of people talking about, "How are we going to afford this?"

And so, I had a short conversation with our oncologist and he said, "I saw a look on your face that scared me a little." And I just went all in. I started a pet cancer fund called The Brodie Fund, and I ran that for seven years and then closed it, not for any other reason that I couldn't sustain being in the pet cancer world anymore. I'm sure you understand that, but then took some time. This was post lockdown, things are better.

And I really missed the nonprofit world. I missed my community, I missed my cat people. And I also recognized that my experience wasn't unique, that rescue, shelters, TNR (trap-neuter-return) groups, these organizations were struggling and needed to be lifted up. And that's basically how Mission Meow was born out of a need. And I could take the experience that I had as a nonprofit director and my experience was then, okay, these things didn't work so well. These things

worked really well. So, there were lessons in both sides that allowed this to happen so quickly from this idea in my head to putting this amazing board together to launching it because it went from just an idea to a launch in a couple months. That was it. We got nonprofit status and we hit the ground running and we gave our first grant in October for \$10,000. So, this dream was a reality very quickly.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's so inspiring. But back up and tell us a little bit – so it went from concept-

Sally Williams:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

-to granting in a short period of time. Walk us through the mission and what the core values and work are that you're really focused on right now.

Sally Williams:

So, our focus is making meaningful change for cats in need. So, in a nutshell, we make dreams come true for small feline-centric nonprofits. That's what we want to do. So, our focus is helping small organizations and I thought long and hard about how are we going to do this because fundraising is hard and the basic ways you're doing it are you are out there fundraising, individual donors, you can apply for grants, you can have events. And businesses, also, are a large part of fundraising. So, I thought we want this to be unique. We want to have a foundation that we can count on all the time. So, there's fewer grants available now and there's a lot of competition for them. We love our individual donors and we need them, but that's a lot of legwork.

Nobody loves a good event more than I do, planning it, being a part of it, but everybody who does this knows that you have to put money into it and the outcomes tend to be unpredictable. Sometimes the best event ends up not raising you the most amount of money. So, I landed on businesses and I came up with an idea of business crowdfunding. So basically, the foundation of our organization are our business partners who sign on to be annual donors. We structure it so they're only donating quarterly. So, we're not asking them to donate every month, but that builds this foundation. So, our next campaign is in January and we already know, we have 50 businesses contributing that month. Now they decide to write a check because they really understand their bottom line, so they feel comfortable. They just write a check. Some of the smaller businesses do different things. They give a percentage of sales, they pick a product that the proceeds go to us, some host events.

We have a behaviorist who was doing mini sessions and the proceeds of the mini session come to us. But all of that coming together – so, the easiest way to explain a number to you is if we have 50 businesses who land on an average of a \$200 donation, some giving more, some giving less, we've just raised \$10,000. Before we've had an individual donation or sold a T-shirt or gotten a grant, anything. That's why I say they're the foundation of our organization. And so that's what allowed us to give in our very first month \$10,000 to Catsbury Park in Asbury Park,

New Jersey who had downsized during the pandemic and quickly outgrew their space and they have an opportunity to expand in the building. And we were able to give \$10,000 towards that expansion.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So beautiful and so awesome and so necessary and functional and practical to all those things. So, Sally, it sounds to me like two different inspirations here. If we have business owners listening, you're probably always looking for new business partnerships. So, if we have businesses listening, let's talk about where they would go to learn more. And if you have, I can't tell you how many beautiful, sold clients, just me alone, I've had saying, "I'm going to start something for cats." But between the fire in your soul to do it and then actually doing it, it's hard. There's expenses. There's not a manual. So, for people that maybe have a nonprofit for cats or are struggling or need help, let's talk about the people who are doing the hands-on cat work and then the people who can supply the funding. Where do both of these cat-loving communities go to learn more about funding or applying for funds?

Sally Williams:

So, if you're a business owner and you're interested in becoming a partner, it's very simple. You go to our website, which is MissionMeow.org and up at the top, you're going to see business partners. Just click on that and a window will open up and you fill out some information. And then we have a conversation and I explain everything about what it means to be a business partner, emphasis on partnership. This is not just a transactional thing. We have a business partners perks package. We have a blogger that's dedicated to blogging for our businesses. We vet all the nonprofits for you so you don't have to do that. So that's really important for me to express to everybody. And they should know ahead of time, it's not a huge ask. You can be a small business and be contributing to Mission Meow.

You can be a big business. And also, we're not coming at you for that huge ask because it's all coming together that this works. That's what makes it so powerful is that if you understand the joy of giving or if you don't, you should. And this Mission Meow is filled with joy. I mean, the giving that we do, it's so big, but it doesn't cost a lot to do it because it's a group coming together.

Starting a nonprofit is just something that you have to have a lot of passion, a lot of dedication. You have to love this. I love the animal community, specifically the cat community. I care so much about it. I just feel like if you have the passion and the drive, you'll make it happen because there's a lot of people out there. I'm a resource. People can email me. If you're thinking you want to start a nonprofit or you are just starting out, get in touch with me. I network with tons of other nonprofit directors. I listen to blogs. Joan Garry has an amazing – she blogs, she has books, she has websites, she has tons of information. She's a great resource for anybody that's looking to start. She has an amazing podcast.

But I just think put yourself out there. Believe that you can do it. For me, anything is possible. I mean, when I started The Brodie Fund, I had zero experience other than I did volunteer. I did get out there and say, "Okay, let me just get my feet wet with an organization." So, I volunteered at the shelter, but then I also got involved with an organization that did events and I eventually

ended up co-chairing events. That really helped. I would say you have to like people as much as animals. Let me throw that out there.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, that that's very true. Yeah.

Sally Williams:

There's a lot of animal lovers that have the passion, but this is a lot of work with people.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And Sally, if we have organizations listening that have nonprofit status and have an idea, they have a passion project, they want an expansion, they need help, financially. Is it the same website?

Sally Williams:

Yes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, there's a tab for donors? And then is there a tab where nonprofits can apply for a grant? How does the grant process then work?

Sally Williams:

Yeah, it's so simple. So, you go to the website again, MissionMeow.org, and there's a grant application. We tried to keep the application as short as possible, but still getting as much information as possible because sometimes grant applications are overwhelming. So, we get all the information we need, that gets automatically emailed to us, and then we review the applications and then we get in touch with the potential candidates and then we make our final decision. Keep in mind, now that the January has closed, we already picked our grant recipient, which is Full Circle MO Feral, which is a group that helps trappers and people out there doing the hard work of TNR. They educate them and supply them with what they need, feral cat dens, cages, such things like that.

We're quarterly, right now, with the goal of as we add more businesses, because that's the foundation of our organization, to be monthly. And then from there, in my head, I already see us a year or so down the road, maybe we can give two grants a month. There are so many wonderful organizations that need the help. So the more business partners that sign on, the more donors we have, the more merchandise we sell, that's how we help more. That's the bottom line.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wonderful.

Sally Williams:

So really we have the need over here and we have the way of making it happen over here. So we got to bring that all together.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's so beautiful and I love it. And I like that the system already has proven, look how quickly you were able – you're soon going to fund your second amazing project-

Sally Williams:

Yes, yes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

-so, such inspiration all the way around. What do you love most right now about Mission Meow? You get up every morning on fire, what specifically sets your heart on fire for this particular project?

Sally Williams:

I would say that I am able to, with the help of everybody, with the volunteers, with the board, everybody, we are able to, and me specifically, able to help a community that I care so deeply about, I mean, as somebody who has loved cats for so long. I mean, I could never have imagined a 25-year career in retail and then I got sick and I couldn't work. And I had an amazing doctor who said, "Volunteer." And I started volunteering. The volunteering turned into studying to become a cat behaviorist, gave me the confidence to launch a nonprofit. So, all of these things just immersed me more in the cat community. I have stayed a volunteer, always helped with organizations. So, to be able to give back, especially we talked a bit about COVID and the lockdowns and what it did to organizations struggling to make ends meet before that, it got harder to fundraise.

The burnout is so real. The compassion fatigue is so real. So, imagine being able to give a check, a very sizable check to a small organization to make a dream come true. And I want to be upfront this, we're not paying rent, we're not paying vet bills, we're not paying the basics. These organizations are already doing that. We're talking about, like I said, expansion or I imagine a rescue has a wonderful outdoor space, but they don't have the money for a catio. Imagine being able to build a catio; or a TNR group, we could buy them a van. I mean, these are things that they're so small, they may not have the bandwidth to fundraise for things like that. And so, in my brain I'm already – the organizations that get the money from us, that get the grant, they sign the memorandum of understanding, it's very simple.

You agree to spend the money on what you've applied for, you provide receipts for it. And then you take a photograph. I see the images already of a group standing in front of a van or the volunteers at a rescue opening that door for the very first time and watching the cats walk out into a catio. I mean, it's that kind of stuff, me imagining that. And these groups, they need it so much.

I get to work with amazing people every day. And I already talked about it, that joy of giving. And that's what I want the business partners to know, too, is they get to experience that. The amount that you give because it comes together allows us to give big. And now you're going to know exactly where your money went and you get to see that picture. The one that's in my head that very soon I'm going to be going down to Catsbury Park with my phone and my camera and

videoing the space that they're going to be moving into. We're going to get to explain why it's so important that they have a medical area, all the different things. So, that joy of giving, I think it's contagious personally.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, it is. And in fact, usually my final question is if there's one thing you would want the world to know or feel or experience, what would it be? But honestly, just my perspective, I'll answer my own question and then you answer my question. But it's true, if you have not yet experienced the powerful life transformation of watching animals have an instantaneously better existence because you have done your part in contributing to that financially, time or otherwise, it's a powerful shift that changes the fiber of who you are in a very positive, good, life-changing way. And giving is something that we are all designed to do that some of us don't have as much experience, but just by practicing, it becomes a wildly addictive way to improve the world quickly.

Sally Williams:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

But you, my friend, you tell me, pertaining specifically to Mission Meow, there's a lot of different tips from your life experiences that you would be able to insightfully share and impact in other people's lives. But for Mission Meow, if you could tell the world one thing about Mission Meow, what would it be?

Sally Williams:

Well, this is going to tie back into the question, but it's so true of Mission Meow as well. Anything is possible. Anything is possible. So, when you are passionate about something, anything is possible. My passion for Mission Meow, the board members' passion for Mission Meow, the volunteers, those goals that we've set, it's all possible. I mean, I already see giving grants every single month. I already see giving two grants a month. I already see changing how things are for these feline-centric nonprofits that are doing amazing work. And they're not struggling in the sense of – they're doing everything right, but like I said, because maybe their social media exposure isn't big enough, maybe their website doesn't look as good as it could because they're spending the money in all the right places.

Now, they can have this grant and have this dream come true. To me, it's contagious, it's infectious. You do this once and people see that and now more business partners sign on. Now, we're going to be giving our second grant. More people see that, more people sign on. So, all of that just means anything is possible for Mission Meow. But I believe that is true for anybody out there right now that's thinking, "I had an idea for a nonprofit," it's possible. You can make this dream come true. If you have a passion for it, anything is possible.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Such good information. And we're so incredibly thankful that Karen took the time to nominate you, Sally, for your Game Changer award. We're also so thankful that you, with quite quick

speed, were able to take a vision, a passion, a fire in your heart, and translate it into an actionable, viable nonprofit already doing amazing things. Your nonprofit is solely reliant on the giving hearts of individuals, but also business owners that are looking to contribute what they can to sustain organizations that have been already vetted and doing their best work, but with additional funds would be able to do so much more. And you're knitting those two communities together. It's amazing. And we're so very thankful.

Congratulations, Sally.

Sally Williams:

[crosstalk 00:20:00]

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, there we go. I'm glad I summarized it correctly. I'm so thankful for what you're doing and I'm looking forward to, in a year or two, when you're up and giving away grants a couple times a month or maybe once a week, it'll be fun to check back in with you. Your nonprofit is powered by the compassion of the people and businesses. And if we can identify and help awaken the community to the need, my goal would be that this interview would help unite passionate businesses that want to support incredible feline-centric nonprofits to be able to offer a better world for kitties all over. And the organization that you put together is uniting those two people. And I'm anxious to see in a couple years where you're at. Until then, good luck with your next funding project and we're so very thankful for everything you're doing.

Sally Williams:

Thank you so, so much.