

Keeping Families Together and Finding New Loving Homes for Surrendered Pets

A Special Interview With Mandy Evans

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so happy that Gayle has nominated our Game Changer today. Mandy Evans has been nominated for a Game Changer Award, and she's taking time out of her very busy schedule to meet with us today to tell us more about the amazing work she's doing in getting animals into safe homes without having to go through the shelter system. So, she is joining us now, and I'm so excited. Congratulations, Mandy, on your Game Changer Award, and thanks for spending a few minutes with us today telling us more about this amazing platform and mission that you're involved with.

Mandy Evans:

Yeah, thank you so much. I'm thrilled to be here.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, Mandy, back up for our listeners, readers or watchers of this video. Back up and talk a little bit about how you were first inspired or how you became so passionate about the work that you're doing.

Mandy Evans:

Sure. So, I've always been an animal lover, from the time that I was a baby actually. My mom has three girls and she bought us all little figurines when we were babies and mine had a dog in it. And so, it's just been this way my whole life. But really, the pivotal moment for me was when I was in my 20s, my cat, Caviar, passed away from cancer, and I had always wanted a pug. So, I actually went out and bought a pug from a breeder. It was the first time I'd ever done that, and she ended up having a malformed spine and was paralyzed. She became paralyzed about three weeks after I got her.

And the experience of having this little dog completely changed my life. I was so dedicated to her. And we used to go into elementary schools and talk to kids about how they approach and talk to people who are different from them, and it really kind of put my life on a new course. I left corporate America and started to spend most of my time helping others, and that's why it led me to running an animal welfare organization.

Dr. Karen Becker:

What a beautiful unfolding. Probably not at all what you had planned and yet so fulfilling to your soul and such important work that you're doing. So, you had this transformative relationship with your beautiful pug, you started educating, and then clearly you identified some unmet needs, at least in your community, but certainly worldwide. Walk us through the next step of what happened next.

Mandy Evans:

Yeah, so I moved to North Idaho. I was from California. And I heard of an opening at our local animal shelter, and I applied and was selected. And so, then it was completely eye-opening, [a] different world. I like to say that we all take a lot of things for granted and we don't understand the complexity of normal day life until you jump into something. And that's what I experienced with animal welfare. It's really a science. You're learning about how to properly house and move animals through a system. And one of the most important lessons I learned is that animal welfare is not about animals. I mean, our job is to ensure that animals are cared for, but it's really about relationships and people, and it's supporting that human-animal bond that is absolutely essential to what we do.

And that's how Home To Home was born. We saw the challenges of people needing to surrender their pets and how willing people were to shame others for the situations they were in. And what ends up happening is that your response to a situation like that is to all of a sudden diminish the human-animal bond and treat it very transactionally. And that's not what's happening on the other end. What's happening on the other end is somebody having to make this really difficult decision that is either based on life circumstances, on the health and welfare, and what's best for the pet. So, we wanted to create something that really honored the human-animal bond, that really honored the love that people have for their pets, and wanting to ensure that this next transition was a positive one for their pet.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And first of all, it's such a massive thing and I'm sure you identified this heartbreaking phenomenon in rescue right away where people are [inaudible 00:05:12]. For a whole host of different reasons, people oftentimes have to rehome their animals. And so, figuring out a system, a platform, figuring out the metrics of how that could happen with the least amount of stress for all parties involved is wonderful. So how did you bring that concept then to fruition?

Mandy Evans:

Well, I like to say that my best ideas happen in the shower. So, this particular idea dawned on me and then I am just one of those people that has a lot of tenacity and won't give up. And I went and sought out funding. We created the platform specifically for our local community. Once we were able to get it up and running, we saw a 33% reduction in our owner surrenders to our shelter, which was huge. And there was a lot of fear in me that our community wouldn't accept this concept because they villainized people for needing to surrender. So how dare we support people in this journey of surrendering their pet or rehoming their pet? But it was quite the opposite. People loved the idea, loved the concept of it. We just received so much positive feedback that we then went out looking for more funding support and converted the site to be a national site.

Now it's throughout North America, so we partner with over 120 shelters who use Home To Home as their rehoming platform in their organization. And then we also have Home To Home available to anyone who needs help, whether they have a partner organization in their community or not. So, if someone is needing to rehome their pet, they go on to home-home.org, they create a pet profile. It's then shared within their community and people can search wider than their community. And people reach out to the owner directly, have a nice conversation and

trying to determine if this potential adopter is the right fit for their pet. And if it is, the pet goes from one home to another. And then during 2020, we expanded even further, recognizing the large impact of people who will be faced with eviction due to the housing crisis that we were having at the time.

So now people can seek a foster home for their pet, and community members can sign up to be that foster home. So, your pet is literally staying in the same community. Now taking that same concept, we actually are now involved in disaster management. So, we deployed during Hurricane Ian and we had so many people sign up to foster impacted families in their area, pets. And really, we're at this point now where we know it works and it's successful. We just need people who need help to post their animals because we have around 7,000 foster families signed up already on the site.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That is so remarkable. When did the shower moment hit timewise?

Mandy Evans:

That was in 2015.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Okay. Wow. So you've accomplished a tremendous amount at a very short period of time. For the 120 shelters that work with Home To Home, walk me through how the logistics go. If they're in an enrolled shelter, is it when a pet parent calls and said, "I've been diagnosed with a terminal illness," or whatever the horrific circumstances are, is that how then they get fed into to your platform? Walk through the logistics of how – You helped explain if it was just an individual needing help. Awesome. What about shelters that maybe don't know about this that could become involved in it? How does that process work?

Mandy Evans:

So, with a shelter, and considering that we are an animal welfare organization, so we absolutely love partnering with other organizations and helping them. So what our recommendation is, is that they have a call tree or an email for anyone seeking to surrender their pet and that they have to go to that person first. And that person is going to offer them some advice, listen with an openness to seeing if there are ways that we can help somebody not need to surrender. A lot of the time, a quality conversation can really help somebody not need to surrender and keep their pet. So we recommend that. And then if that doesn't work, they ask that they post their pet over onto the Home To Home platform. And if you are an animal welfare organization, we provide a branded website that's similar to kind of like Facebook. How you have your own Facebook page, but it's part of the bigger platform. That's essentially what it's like for a shelter.

So, when you go to that particular organization's page, it has their logo. And then when someone posts their pet, it's not headquarters, it's not Home To Home that's reviewing the pet, it's somebody at that organization. So, we want that organization to review the pet profile because there may be resources that they could provide that we wouldn't even know about at a headquarters level that can be provided by that community partner to help that person be able to

keep their pet. So, they read the profile and then they approve the pet, and it gets posted to their shelter's Home To Home page that is also viewable by anybody who might be seeking a pet that isn't involved in that organization.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's awesome. In terms of incredible shelter support, this is something that every shelter could radically benefit from for so many different reasons, but also so nice to have an undergirding supportive parent organization that's there to help get all the logistics put into place. Just an awesome idea. Have you had some international interest – or in Canada? Are you just in [the] U.S. right now?

Mandy Evans:

No, we're in Canada as well. The world, wow, that would be great. I'm all for it. But right now, we have to be very focused on sustainability and growing the platform within North America. We really, really strive to continue to keep our site free for all users. We don't charge any kind of rehoming fee, but to do that, we need sponsorships, we need support, technology. Though it seems very simple, it's really expensive and difficult to maintain. And there are a lot of really high expectations around tech. You can't let somebody sit and wait for something for 30 seconds. No, it needs to be like three seconds. Well, in order to maintain that, I mean we had 46,000 animals on the site last year, and all of that data is saved. And when that data is saved, it kind of can slow things down. So, I'm not ready to go international yet. I do think that it could be an extremely wonderful benefit to many on the world stage, but right now we have to focus on keeping it sustainable for the U.S. and Canada.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And you're growing at such an amazing clip that you probably just want to be – You're stewarding your current body of support really well, and there's a growth curve that you'll have to, along with the financial aspect of course, that you've got to keep everything in sync. You're an incredibly busy woman, but my goodness, the number of animals. So, over the course of Home To Home, how many successful transitions have you had?

Mandy Evans:

Oh, well, I will tell you that we don't, because the undercurrent of Home To Home isn't really about rehoming. It's about providing people with resources that will help them keep their pet. I'm sure as everybody listening understands, the old way was you take your animal to a shelter and they take it in. Well, what we've learned is that by providing even a buffer of time, people will figure out a way to keep their pet. So, we have found, and I feel like I'm going to say this wrong, but I think we have about a 72% success rate. So people that post our pets on the site have a success rate, and we define success this way: If that pet was not surrendered to an animal shelter and it did not die, so it wasn't euthanized or even [via] natural causes, then any of the other outcomes are success. So those could be that the pet went to a friend or family, that they kept the pet, that they were successfully able to rehome it through the platform. Any of those options would be considered, by us, a big success.

Dr. Karen Becker:

By everyone. Mandy, by everyone, a big success. That is a beautiful mission to be able to have your heart first be, “What could we do to support you to keep the animal in your home?” And if that's not possible, “How can we find an appropriate next home?” A loving, caring home that allows for minimal damage for all parties involved. It's really, really beautiful. So, this is a hard question for you, but when you get up in the morning and think about all of the good that your platform is doing, what motivates you the most? What do you love most about the work that you're doing?

Mandy Evans:

Honestly, I think what really drives me is this idea that we don't trust our neighbors anymore. And that by showing people that people are truly good, people have really positive intentions. And this platform, I feel like, is just this little itty-bitty nugget in a very large world where we are fed with so much fear and negativity, and you have Home To Home that says, “You know what? I trust you and I believe in you, and I trust you in the sense that —” and this is a big leap for animal welfare. We used to not be this way. Where, if you have a pet, and it can be any legal animal, so it could be a lamb, a tarantula, a betta fish, whatever, we trust you to make a good decision on where your pet should go and that we don't need to get involved.

We are not, somehow because we entered into animal welfare, all of a sudden the moral kings and queens and the best decision makers. We think you are the best decision maker for your pet. And I really love that we have the ability to kind of go out and try to help people see this. So that's kind of what drives me.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And because the conventional shelter system is so overburdened anyway, what a beautiful breath of fresh air for all shelter workers that need support and help and differentiation and options. This is a really great way to help unburden or to at least prevent the addition of animals that would potentially not have a 70% plus success rate in finding a new forever home. You're circumventing having to even go down that path. It's just brilliant all the way around. So, tell us again, if people wanted to hear, if people wanted to hear more, learn more, donate, if people are wildly inspired, can you tell us all the ways that people would be able to get in touch with the organization?

Mandy Evans:

Absolutely. So, you can go to home-home.org and look at the site. If you want to reach us, you can email us at info@home-home.org and we're happy to connect with you. We are on Facebook, we're on Instagram, and yeah, we would love to hear from you. I mean, the nice thing too is that we're small enough that you're going to get a personal response and we're really invested in the work that we're doing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, that's apparent and marvelous. Mandy, if you could tell the world one thing, if you were going to share one thing with everyone that you meet about the work that you're doing, what would it be?

Mandy Evans:

Putting that caveat about the work that we're doing, I think it's kind of what I – reiterating what I've said is that fear is used as a tool to manipulate us and control. And that I think if we don't understand somebody or we're confused by something, having a conversation and learning, I mean, I'm in a community where we have a lot of different political views. Animal welfare has a lot of varying views, and what I've learned is that, really, people are people and we all want the same things, and they're amazing. My neighbors and people that may not agree with me on my beliefs, it doesn't matter because we are all human. We all want to feel safe. And, watching the news, I'm a big poo-poo on the news, it just feels like we're taught to fear each other, [but] really, our neighbors are pretty amazing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's really good advice. The vast majority of people on the Earth are good people, and it's really good advice that you have set up your platform, that you are working off the premise that most humans have good hearts, and connecting good-hearted people together with other good-hearted people with an animal in that swing. What a lovely way to help people remember the goodness that's in all of us, and then connect those people together. It's really, really wonderful. I am incredibly thankful that Gayle, one of your strong supporters, took the time to nominate you and your awesome organization. It has been amazing to learn more about all that you're doing, and I can't wait to see where you are in 5, 10, 15 years. I hope that every shelter in the US gets wisely connected, and thanks for taking time to explain the work that you're doing.

Mandy Evans:

Yeah, no, I really appreciate it. As I'm sure that you can tell, I really love talking about the work we're doing. I believe in it greatly, and I just appreciate any opportunity to share more about it. Thank you.