

Improving Treatment of Animals Through Community Work

A Special Interview With Dr. Ala Izydorczyk

By Dr. Karen Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker and I'm so just heart-warmed that I have the pleasure and the honor to interview Dr. Ala this morning. She has been nominated for a Game Changer award representing an amazing organization. We had a number, in fact, I'm not going to say dozens, but we had probably half a dozen people say, "Please interview Dr. Ala," because of the work that this organization is doing. So, we are so thankful to be able to spend a few minutes with her this morning, talking about her passion and the work that she does. So congratulations, Dr. Ala, on your Game Changer award, and thank you so much for taking some time this morning to talk with me.

Dr. Ala Izydorczyk:

Right. Hi, everybody, and thank you so much for this opportunity to speak on behalf of Soi Dog Foundation. I mean, maybe I can speak a little bit about myself, though I don't really like to, to be honest, so I'll just give a brief introduction. I'm originally from Poland. I'm a vet who graduated from the Polish University in Warsaw, but I grew up in Asia, so I have a very strong bond to Asia. I grew up in Singapore. So, every opportunity I had to travel, I would always be going back to Asia, volunteering and so on. And when this opportunity popped up to be able to work in Phuket, in Thailand, for Soi Dog Foundation, I grabbed it immediately. It wasn't really even about the place, it was about Soi Dog Foundation and about the job.

Because I knew about Soi Dog Foundation before I started to work there and I knew from my days volunteering in Asia as well, on summers and so on, that there was so much to be done here and how much one person can help by coming over and working with other people, inspiring other people and really making change here. So, I feel really kind of blessed and I feel kind of like a destiny that this happened at the time that it did. And I grabbed the opportunity, I got the job and, I mean, the rest is history. So, I've been here now for over six years and we've seen a big growth of the organization over this time. Soi Dog Foundation has been founded in 2003, so it's going to be 20 years next year in Phuket, in Thailand. So, the mission of the organization is to improve welfare for the dogs and cats, more broadly in Asia, but of course it started with Phuket.

Then, maybe around seven years ago, we started reaching out into Bangkok. Right now, we are in at least 25 provinces around Thailand, and we are growing and growing. At present time, we have 13 mobile teams. A mobile team is a team of two vets and support staff, dog catchers, who go out into remote areas. And we go and do mass sterilizations for the communities there. Because most of the dogs and cats in Thailand are free-roaming. Even if they are owned, they are free to roam. So obviously that kind of contributes to the problem of overpopulation. And when there's too many animals out there, too many dogs and cats, they are not seen as something of value and it creates problems within the community. Thailand is a Buddhist country so things like euthanasia are out of the question.

Animals are very much treated as a part of society, so that is why we are able to do the work that we are doing in Thailand, because there's a wide acceptance of these animals out there in the streets. Obviously, their welfare is a little bit compromised as well. So, what we're trying to do and what we can see that we have already achieved in Bangkok, for example, and in Phuket to a large degree as well. I mean, in Phuket right now, we're at such a stage where the dog population's very stable. We have a growing old dog population, so the dogs are living longer, healthier, better lives. Right now, we are battling an explosion in the cat population so we are very much focused on cats in Phuket, but in Bangkok, it's still dogs. In the other provinces, it's still dogs. Dogs were the ones who always were reported by people who suffered cruelty and neglect, poisonings and things like that.

So we are actively battling against animal cruelty through different means. One of these means is through CNVR, so it stands for catch, neuter, vaccinate, return. I'm not sure if people are familiar, it's like TNR, I think, in Western countries for cats. So, through doing that, we can see a steady decrease in the population, and so improved welfare because we do surveys year on year, and we can see how year on year things are improving, not only in the general decline of the population, but the welfare, the animal welfare of the animals. And also, the acceptance, because a very interesting thing that we were able to measure over the last six years in Bangkok is the change of attitudes of people towards the animals. So, when we started, only about 20% of the dogs would have some kind of sign of ownership, like a collar, or maybe a water bowl put out for them, something like this. Right now, it's at 80%, over just six years.

So that relationship between humans and animals has changed for the better. And this is something amazing, because as an animal welfare organization, that's what we're working for. It's not really about the numbers, it is about improving the relationship of humans towards animals and making people more responsible towards these animals. So, apart from CNVR, which is probably our biggest program and something that has been very core for Soi Dog since the beginning, so CNVR was always the most important thing. Another thing alongside is community engagement, education by all different means. So, we have a humane education program for kids at schools. I mean, we have kids who are 4 or 5 years old. They come over to the shelter, they spend the day. We visit schools. So, before COVID, we had good numbers, we were reaching over 10,000 kids every year.

Now we've kind of gone online. And now this year we are starting to get back to normal, so I'm hoping that it's again going to grow. So, we've got the community engagement, also doing workshops for people in the community, for adults as well, for people who are feeders for these dogs because most of these dogs have some kind of feeder. There's no official owner. Some do have owners and they're free-roaming, but most of them are community dogs, community cats. So, it wouldn't be one person who would say that that's my dog, but many would feed them and take care of them. And the only missing thing is the veterinary care and so on. This is where Soi Dog comes in also, in Phuket. So, every day we pick up dogs and cats for treatment, about 20, 30 animals every single day. So, our hospital's also very much grown over the years.

I mean, the hospital for dogs was designed by Gill Dalley, who was our founder, who sadly passed away about a year after I joined. I had the privilege of moving those dogs into the new

hospital, so kind of upgrading. About three years ago, we also opened a new cat hospital. So, these are really big kind of things that happened because of the support we have from our donors, because it's amazing, the amount of animals we're able to help. Our dog hospital is about 150 dogs at any one time, sometimes more. In the cat hospital, likewise, up to 200 cats sometimes. So, these are big buildings, big, good infrastructure. Our vet team has now grown over the years, so we've got 13 vets on rota and we've got about 25 support staff. And this also would not be possible without people helping us and donating and making this work possible.

So, I feel very privileged and happy that I can be part of this. And where we don't have to make decisions based on, at this moment, finances. I mean, Soi Dog never did that, Soi Dog really was always about animal welfare, finding a way, finding a way. But we often go far beyond where other organizations in the West that I've also volunteered for and worked for would go, because of limited resources and so on. Obviously, here in Thailand, also medicine and so on is cheaper, so we get more value for the money from the Western donations and so on. So, we are always able to do as much as possible and to have the best, always with animal welfare in mind as the most important thing. And that was what I was told also by Gill, when I joined. Don't worry about the expenses, just think about the animal. And for me, that is a big relief, because that is the most important thing and why I wanted to work for this organization as well.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Gosh, Dr. Ala, so I have so many questions and so many thoughts, but it has to be so incredibly fulfilling for everyone involved with this organization to watch the cultural shift. Because of this organization, you're shifting the way people view, interact, treat, and respond and think about the animals in their environment. It has gone from abuse and hostility or a lack of understanding and a lack of empathy and a lack of compassion. And because you are working all of the systems at once, you're caring for the dogs that need to be cared for, the animals, but you're also instituting education. And by you educating the young people in that community about empathy and compassion, you are hopefully-

And I think you can measure from the service that you're doing, you're shifting the numbers so that in 10 years, and in 20 years, those young kids that were educated about compassion and empathy will grow up to not be abusers or people who poison or people that intentionally harm animals. So, by you working the whole system, you're changing the culture for the betterment of the entire community. It has to be unbelievable to participate in that.

Dr. Ala Izydorczyk:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that's the most challenging part, obviously, changing people's attitudes and their behaviors. That's really very challenging and I can't say we've fully succeeded yet.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I'm sure.

Dr. Ala Izydorczyk:

It's a road uphill, but it definitely, when you see these kinds of results and when you see how people change, and you can measure it in a survey as well over the period of a couple of years, it

really gives us hope that it's not for nothing, that we are actually achieving something. And I think that's important for any organization. And then I also feel privileged that working for Soi Dog, we are able to do this monitoring and evaluation and actually spend some money on this as well, because I think it's important to be able to show your team that your work has meaning and you are making a difference. And despite all, it's actually getting better. To tell your donors, I think it's important. People want to know that when they donate to a cause, it has an effect. It's not just wasted money.

So, for us, it's not only about the single animals that we help, which of course we do. I mean, our shelter has, at any one time, we have 1,600 animals in our care, at least, in our shelter. So we have close to 1,000 dogs at the moment. I mean, the numbers are fluctuating because we have adoptions going on. So, we always promote adoption over buying animals. So, we do about 40 to 50 adoptions every month, mostly local, but we had some adoptions to the U.S.. I mean, with the U.S., with the ban, it was a bit difficult, but I think we're getting back now.

Now, Canada as well and the U.K., so we've got some international adoptions as well. But mostly we go for the local population to make sure for people to understand, you always have a choice and you can make that compassionate choice, and to promote that, change that attitude again. And I think again, with using celebrities or famous people here, that also helps. When somebody sees a celebrity adopting over buying a purebred dog, it can become very quickly a trend. And so that's what we're hoping to see and we see more and more of that. Especially young people, young people do change. That's great

Dr. Karen Becker:

So it's quite clear that this is your heart, this is your mission. The fact that you're living in a foreign country, doing this amazing work, this is what you were born to do, and obviously quite fulfilling. When you get up in the morning, Dr. Ala, what do you love most about this really important work that you're doing?

Dr. Ala Izydorczyk:

I mean, there's many things. I don't know. I'm genuinely very grateful for many things, for being able to work in Thailand, but that is not my number one thing. For this amazing organization with so many amazing people. And as we grow, we attract more talent and better people. And it's really inspiring. I'm inspired by the people that work at Soi Dog, by the perseverance of our vets and veterinary staff and the vet support staff. It's not an easy job every single day to be able to cope with – the animals that actually come into our hospital are in a very bad state. If they are well enough to be treated offsite, so in the temple, on the beach, wherever these animals are, in the homes of people who are low income, we will go out there with our community outreach program and we will treat those animals there in situ.

So, we do about 1,500 treatments every month offsite. So, any of the animals that come into our hospitals are really in a serious condition. So be it a cruelty case, be it a road traffic accident and et cetera, et cetera. And very often you have to make hard decisions like euthanasia, which for a vet in Thailand, it's not an easy thing because it's very much against their beliefs. So, the team that we have, has to be double as strong to understand-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Sure.

Dr. Ala Izydorzcyk:

-why sometimes, even though we do it very small percentage compared to many others, but sometimes the kindest thing is to let that animal go. And just see a lot of suffering and neglect from the human side. It can take its toll, but our team is very strong. I'm very, very proud of them. Very, very proud.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Gosh. So, you're literally participating in shifting culture. You're shifting the welfare and well-being of thousands and thousands and thousands of animals. The organization is doing incredible work. If you could want the world to know one thing, if you could share with the world one message, what would it be?

Dr. Ala Izydorzcyk:

I mean, in general, I would like everybody to know that you always have a choice, that there is always a choice. And you can choose the more compassionate route or you can go for the easier route or do what everybody else is doing, but it's important to choose what is right, what you feel is right. And in the case of animals, it'll be adoption over – especially in a country that is struggling with an overpopulation of dogs and cats like Thailand. We estimate about 10 to 12 million dogs on the streets in Thailand and thousands in the shelters, thousands in the shelters.

So, rather than going to a night market and buying a poodle, or going to one of these breeders that, again, we are trying to improve these conditions and set some standards for breeders as well. So, that's another part of our work as well. But you should be choosing adoption and helping that animal and just being part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, I do know. And I also know that the work that Soi Dog is doing is impacting communities, lives, overpopulation issues, impacting the welfare of those animals immensely. And we're so grateful for the entire organization. Dr. Ala, if people wanted to learn more, if they wanted to donate, if they wanted to find out more about Soi Dog, where would they go?

Dr. Ala Izydorzcyk:

So, you can visit our website, so that's SoiDog.org, or you can find us on Facebook as well, at Soi Dog Foundation. Okay? There's a few pages, but just go for Soi Dog Foundation. And we're very quick to respond and so on. So, please reach out, and the more donations and support we have, the more work we can do. And we are super grateful for that.

Dr. Karen Becker:

We are super grateful. We are so grateful for the lots of people that have donated to this amazing organization for a Game Changer award. We're so thankful for the passion in your heart, the

compassion of the organization, and the vital work you're doing in shifting welfare for animals in your area. Thank you so much. And we're so grateful that you took the time today to talk with us.

Dr. Ala Izydorczyk:

It's been a pleasure. Thank you so much. And thank you also for supporting us and being a donor. I didn't know that you were, so thanks so much.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Ala Izydorczyk:

[inaudible 00:18:04] Thank you.