

Giving Hope and a Second Chance to Pets

A Special Interview With Dr. Andrea Carlson

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so excited that Juanita, Deborah and Karen have all nominated Dr. Andrea Carlson for a Game Changer. And Dr. Andrea is joining me today to tell us a little bit more about the amazing work that she's doing. Her clients love her, and we're excited to learn more about her integrative practice. So welcome, Andrea, and congratulations on your Game Changer award.

Dr. Andrea Carlson:

Thank you. Thank you for having me, and thank you for the honor to be here.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So wonderful. So, if you will back up and tell our listeners, readers and subscribers a little bit more about – I'm sure, of course, we became veterinarians because we love animals. But you went above and beyond. After you went through veterinary school, walk us through your motivation to become a veterinarian, but then the transition from you gaining additional tools and information resources needed to expand the services that you offer to your clients. How did that happen?

Dr. Andrea Carlson:

Well, I always wanted to be a veterinarian. Well, I wanted to be a teacher for a long time, and then found a passion in animals. My dad always rescued animals and instilled a love of animals for me. So, I knew I wanted to be a vet a long time ago. I was always interested in natural medicine, but truth be told, my mentor discouraged me from pursuing natural medicine and told me it wasn't real and it wouldn't help me, and I wouldn't be successful at it. So, I let it go all through vet school, and then graduated and worked for that man for a long time. And when it came down to me buying the practice and making it my own, I knew that I wanted to change directions. I wanted to be able to offer my patients more than what I was doing.

I was tired of treating the same things over and over again, and I knew there had to be other ways. And so, I started my journey about 12 years ago into holistic medicine. I got extra certification. I'm a certified traditional Chinese veterinary medicine practitioner. So basically, I took extra classes and became certified in acupuncture, Chinese herbs, Chinese massage, Chinese food therapy. And then I've just kept going from there. Every time I learn something, I find out that there's more to learn. So currently, I am also certified animal chiropractic and end-of-life care, and starting rehab certification. So, I feel that lifetime learning is just the best way to be the best that I can be. And every time I learn something new, I was just at a weekend course this weekend for applied kinesiology. And 15, 20 years ago, I never would've understood energy medicine or that there were other things out there. And so, it's just amazing to just keep learning.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And it's so wonderful that you are a perpetual student of the art of medicine and life. I think that us being curious and inquisitive, of course, it keeps our practice fresh and it prevents burnout for us as professionals. But it also is such a gift to your clients and your patients. That as you add pieces to your toolbox, you're providing hope and resources and a different option for people that oftentimes come to you, having none of those things. So, what a beautiful gift that you're learning all that you're learning, and continue to learn. I love that. What do you love most about your job as a veterinarian?

Dr. Andrea Carlson:

You actually touched on it just a moment ago. It's giving hope. It's giving hope when there is none. Giving hope to my patients who are given two weeks to live, and I can make them live seven to eight months longer. And I'm talking good quality of life, not just living, but living the best life. And giving hope to my clients so that they love their pets. And when they're told, "There's nothing more that we can do," and then they come to me and I'm like, "There's always something we can do it." Just my clients. I'm going to cry, too. They break down in tears because everyone is not giving them hope. And that's my goal is to give them hope, give their pet the best possible life that it can have for the longest possible time. I do also love working with my staff, and I couldn't do what I do without them.

And I do make sure that I take care of them. I make sure they have work-life balance. And I think I'm even giving hope to other conventional vets in the area. They're starting to send me their patients. They're like, "I don't know what she does. It's kind of crazy, but whatever she does, it works." And so that's the biggest thing, is that the people that are like, "She might be crazy, but it's working, and I don't know what else to do for your pet." So those people are starting to trust me too. And that really makes me feel good.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, that was actually one of my next questions is, when I practiced in your neck of the woods for almost 20 years, there was some tension between the conventional veterinary community, who was repelled or had a version, I guess, would be the best way, to what I did in that area. Do you feel that the barometer is shifting in that, yes, you're doing – oftentimes we get, I don't want to say the bottom-of-the-barrel patients, but oftentimes conventional veterinarians think about referring to anyone in their area when either they're at the end of their rope, and there's nothing else they can do or they have a client or situation that they're like, "Oh my gosh, there is nothing to do."

But getting bottom-of-the barrel patients is how most holistic veterinarians have built their entire career. That is who we get and that's who we attempt to fix and/or fix. And then these there's amazing outcomes that nourish our soul and make a believer out of our client, but not necessarily other veterinarians. And yet, would you say, Andrea, that you are beginning to feel like you're developing some camaraderie, at least the ability to share some clients in your area before they get to the end of their rope? Do you have relationships with veterinarians in your area that are starting to form more of a camaraderie or a good, working professional relationship?

Dr. Andrea Carlson:

Yes. And I think that's been client-driven, very specifically. My clients are going in and asking about nutrition, and that I give kudos to you and all the other holistic veterinarians that are out there on social media, getting the word out. But the clients are requesting nutritional advice. They're requesting holistic options. And so, there are several vets in the area now that are like, "You know what? We don't do that. We'd be happy to be your conventional vet, but we know this place in Merrillville that will do what you're asking." And so, that's been the biggest reward, is not seeing the patient at the end of their life when there's nothing left for them to do. It's getting them when they're young and I can change them from the beginning.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's beautiful. And I also love the fact that there's this positive, kind, mutually beneficial relationship development that's happening with the conventional vets in the area. There's no reason that shouldn't be that way. There's no reason that we can't all do what we do best to contribute to the benefit and well-being of our patients. There's just no reason we can't all get along, play well, but also mutually respect and support each other. That's so wonderful that's happening. That has to be very, very fulfilling for you.

Andrea, when you think about your career, when you think about your patients and your clients and what you're doing in terms of helping to extend the well-being, the lifespan/healthspan of your patients, if you could tell the world one thing about what you do, or if you'd want the world to know one thing, what would it be?

Dr. Andrea Carlson:

I would definitely say, be kind. Be kind to your veterinarian, be kind to the staff, but just be kind in general. The world is a crazy place right now, and we need to be nice to each other. So many people have things that you don't even know about that are struggling with, and it only takes a moment to be kind versus to be derogatory or mean. And so that's one of the big things.

But also, I guess, with just in practice and in medicine, I would say that people need to be their pet's advocate. They need to continue learning and continue using the resources that they have, where you have a blog. You do things like this, social media. Keep learning, keep being your pet's advocate so that you and your pet can continue having this lifelong, beautiful relationship.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Such good words and such wise words. And also, I think that by becoming the most knowledgeable pet guardian that you can, it helps reduce regret, in that it's not the veterinarian's responsibility to make all the decisions as the owner or the guardian. I do. I couldn't agree more. We want our clients, we want the people caring for these animals to understand exactly what we're doing and why we're doing it. And to understand and agree that this is the path that they want to take.

The more information they have to make better decisions, the better decisions that they'll make. But that comes about through a system of self-education that the owner needs to take responsibility for. So, I think that's a really good thing that you are supporting and challenging and working on. Andrea, if people wanted to learn more about your practice and what you do, where would they go to find you?

Dr. Andrea Carlson:

I currently practice at Southlake Animal Hospital in Merrillville, Indiana. Best way to get a hold of us or find out more about us would be to go to our website, www.MerrillvilleVets.com.

Dr. Karen Becker:

This is wonderful. Well, Dr. Carlson, such a delight to interact with you again via this interview. I appreciate there was a number of your clients that nominated you. You're well-loved and well supported, and we're so thankful for all that you're doing for our wellness animal community. But that I also want to congratulate you on your Game Changer award, in that you are in the trenches, doing the hard work kindly. And supporting your staff and the people in your area in a way that is diversified, and yet so synergistic with everyone's desire to keep their pets healthy. Thank you for everything you're doing.

Dr. Andrea Carlson:

And thank you. Somebody recently once said that you, and there's a couple other people, are the godmothers of holistic medicine. And that really stuck with me because it was people like you that encouraged me, whether you knew it or not, to continue this journey. And without people like you, I think we wouldn't be where we are. So, thank you very much for all that you've done too.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, and thank you. A team of all of us worldwide, doing our little piece. I'm contributing the little piece that I can. You're contributing the pieces that you can by us all doing what we do together and simultaneously, that is how we build awareness. We build health, and we build a community of loving, kind, supportive pet owners that are able to provide the very best options for our animals. So together, we are much more powerful, we're stronger and we're also more knowledgeable. So, thank you for those kind words, and above all, thank you for everything that you're doing.

Dr. Andrea Carlson:

Thank you.