

Achieving Natural Healing and Wellness Through Functional Medicine

A Special Interview With Dr. Katie Kangas

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so thankful that Paula has nominated Dr. Katie Kangas, who's joining me today. Katie has won the Game Changer Award, and I'm so fired up that my integrative colleague has taken time out of her very busy day to join us and talk a little bit more about the amazing work she's doing. So, Dr. Kangas, welcome and congratulations on your Game Changer Award.

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Thank you so much, and thank you Paula for nominating me. And Karen, I just have to say I am honored to appear with you and to be invited into the beautiful intention that you have put together with this program in highlighting veterinarians not only to be of resource to pet parents, but to connect with our colleagues and really give some demonstration of things that we do that are not only helpful for pets and pet parents, but really rewarding for us and expanding beyond how we were originally trained as conventional veterinarians. So, thank you so much for giving us a stage to share all this.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, well, that is exactly why I started Game Changers, that exact reason. Thank you for participating and for seeing that. It is my goal to be able to unite pet parents that need help, want help and maybe need things that some veterinarians aren't familiar with. But then veterinarians listening to this saying, "I know nothing about that" – it's also to inspire our conventional colleagues that there are options out there. But then this ties into my first question because I know that when you graduated from vet school, you graduated with the same degree that we all did, but then either you got frustrated [that] it wasn't enough, you were broken-hearted or you just knew out of the bottom of your heart that you needed to expand your toolbox because you didn't have enough. But usually it's one of those scenarios. Would you walk us through, for people that aren't familiar, walk us through how you became a more open-minded veterinarian with a much bigger toolbelt?

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Awesome. And perfectly said. And actually, when you're portraying those reasons, it might be a combo of all three, but the most prominent one was to find additional resources and options beyond my limited toolbox. And I will back up and say that I was a Wisconsin grad. I'm from Wisconsin originally, but I've been in San Diego for more than 20 years. And I graduated from University of Wisconsin Veterinary School in 1993. And somewhere along the line – Well, and I'll just back up and say I did general practice. I was a wildlife vet. I worked at wildlife internships. We have a lot of similarities in our past too, Karen. And then I became a shelter vet, and I was actually the medical director of the San Diego Humane Society and SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) from 2002 to 2007. I volunteered at shelters a lot before

that and even after that. But I was employed in the medical department at the San Diego Humane Society here.

And during that timeframe is when my 14-year-old doggy named Austy, who by the way, I painted her at a Paint-Your-Pet.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Beautiful.

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Her portrait is right here. And the cool thing is I brought her here for our meeting together today, but she hangs in between my two main exam rooms with her portrait on top of her story of how she led me into what I do. So, obviously I'll share that with everyone right now. But what happened was I was working at the shelter and my Austy girl was 14 years old, and she started having weakness in her hind end and lumbar sacral issues in the lower spine. And she started falling and knuckling in the hind end and having trouble pooping and having trouble getting up. And a lot of the symptoms that older pets often get, that many pet parents are experienced with.

And I knew that from prior experience, few of the medications that are used, she just didn't tolerate well. And I felt like my options were really limited for her, which they were in conventional medicine strategies. And so, the neat thing is I don't know exactly when it happened, but for a few years prior to that, I became very interested in holistic health and how I could apply that. I started doing things for me. How can I apply this for my patients and my own pets? But even though I had this interest, I will tell you, I went to one homeopathy seminar, and homeopathy of course is just one subset of holistic medicine. That's one thing I love to clear up with pet parents actually, because a lot of people think that the word homeopathic or homeopathy is synonymous with all of holistic. So, I love to explain to people [that] holistic is the big umbrella of natural healing support mechanisms, lots of tools, but homeopathy is one subset with homeopathic remedies.

And anyway, I went to a homeopathic seminar and I was like, "Wow, this is amazing. I got to do more." And so, I had this interest for a while. And then of course my doggy, Austy, which of course our pets and our patients and our personal pets, for everyone who has pets, they are some of our greatest teachers in life. And they not only inspire us and literally teach us things and teach us how to be more present and all kinds of gifts, but they often lead us down paths that we're supposed to go and point us in directions. So, because she was having issues and I already had this interest, I'm like, I've got to find somebody who can – Because I'd always thought about getting a mentor, but I just didn't know who to look for. And I was so busy at work and just never got to it until I had this instigating reason.

So, I sought out a holistic veterinarian in my area, who is still very near and dear to my heart, and that is Dr. Keith Weingardt. Dr. Keith Weingardt owned Animal Healing Center here in San Diego. He now relocated to Portland, Oregon. I brought Austy to Dr. Keith and miraculous results with changing her diet. I admit she was on kibble. I didn't know any better. We all have to

start somewhere. So, I love when my clients get the guilt feelings of, “Oh, I should have done this sooner and I should have –” And it's like, “Hey, we all have to start somewhere.” And now we just get to move forward with more knowledge. And of course, this kind of a platform is so beautiful to bring more knowledge out there. But anyway, I changed her diet, did acupuncture, started chiropractic therapy, and it blew me away what happened for my dog.

And I literally got to spend almost two more years with her, more than a year and a half. And she went from falling down and not able to poop on her own to literally short jogs again, like walking, able to jog for short times. I mean, I was like, “This is miraculous, I can't not pursue this for my career now. Now seeing this for myself with my own pet, I definitely need to be able to provide something like this for pets.” So, I put in my notice at the shelter, which I had been at for five years at my full-time position, and I enrolled in the Chi Institute down in Florida. And as most holistic veterinarians, I believe, started my pathway into holistic veterinary medicine through Chinese medicine, and then branched from there. And obviously I do acupuncture – certified veterinary acupuncturist. And herbal, and branched into homeopathy.

And then through the years now, I've been doing holistic for over – that was 2008. So I've been doing holistic for quite some time, over 15 years. And then through the years, I really – everybody finds their niche, or sometimes you even change niches and you get interested in this. It is such a rewarding career because we have so many things we can do. And so, now within holistic medicine, my main focus, the foundation where I start from with my patients the majority of the time, is functional medicine. And I have to give you – you deserve many, many shout-outs. But this [“The Forever Dog” book by Dr. Karen Becker and Rodney Habib] is right next to me. And I have to say it's in every exam room. It's in my reception area. And I bookmarked this page because you also described functional medicine, you and Rodney in here. And that is really my focus and where my heart's at.

And of course, functional medicine includes supporting the body to function best. And the way I like to generally describe it to people in a very easy way is kind of two steps or two concepts. And one of them is to build up the body, support the body with as many natural tools and nutrition for it to function at optimum. And then the second principle in functional medicine is also avoiding as many things that deteriorate function and body health and cause degeneration and inflammation. So, really, with those two basic broad concepts, you fill up a lot of gaps with amazing tools that support those goals.

Dr. Karen Becker:

First of all, I was waiting for you to say that the shoe dropped with your heart dog and that something bad happened. I'm so thankful that out of you trying integrative medicine, your dog went on to have this amazing not just last chapter, but many more years. That, of course, would change you as a veterinarian, but it would change you cellularly as a human. And that you have almost an ethical or moral obligation to pass that gift along to others. And that's exactly what you have done. You've changed your life and you've become a functional medicine veterinarian to help other people experience the benefits of removing lifestyle obstacles and fortifying the body with everything it needs, eliminating everything it doesn't. That's exactly what you're doing on a

daily basis. I know you're wildly busy. I have referred many people to you. I also know people fly in and drive in. I know you're a very busy woman with a very busy practice, but I also know you get up in the morning still with a fire in your heart. So, when you get up in the morning, what do you love most about the amazing work you're doing?

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Well, thank you for recognizing that and putting that into great words because it is so true. I literally, I just love what I do. And it can be fatiguing and intense to work with patients, pets that are sick and need so much help, but it's so rewarding that literally every day I'm like, "Who do I get to go help today?" "Who do I get to assist?" And the neat thing is, what I love about my job is that fortunately for me, I'm just as much of a people person as I am an animal lover, an animal person. And of course, a lot of veterinarians, amazing, amazing people, but might be more happy about working with pets and not as a connector with people as much. And fortunately for me, I love both. And that really makes my job rewarding because every day people tell me how much of a difference I've made in their pet's lives and how much of a difference often, I mean – probably half the time I hear, "I've gotten healthier" or "Other human family members in my family have gotten healthier because we've worked with you as a veterinarian for our pet."

And really, it's so fun how the context of proactive healthcare as opposed to reactive and you're just putting out fires that sort of match that individual, what disease do I need to work on? But when you're really into prevention and supporting health, the whole family gets to benefit. And it's so rewarding to get that feedback on a very regular basis.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. We often see health travels up the leash. And in your situation, you're coming in as focused – as a doctor, you're focusing on the animal, the four-legged animal. But the byproduct of unlocking, removing health and lifestyle obstacles for that four-legged animal is that the entire home becomes healthier. And actually, your entire community, because those healed, recovered, more vibrant, healthier humans have neighbors. And the neighbors will say, what are you doing? And then health perpetuates more health. And what you are doing [is] you're the igniter with the fuzzies that allows this healing response to occur in the home and in the community. It has to be incredibly rewarding. So, this brings me to my last question, Dr. Katie. If you could tell the world one thing, if you would want the world to know one thing, it's a hard question, but what would it be?

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Well, I would start that with – it is a difficult question. I would start that with the awareness, to share the awareness that there is so much more beyond the conventional health care concepts, in both, obviously, veterinary medicine for our pets but also in human medicine for ourselves. And that's why I appreciate this platform so much in not only sharing my ideas and my background, but of so many others of our colleagues. And it really opens up everybody's awareness for more inspiration of what we can do for our pets and ourselves. And as I think most of the veterinarians that appear on here, it's so wonderful to have numerous tools in the toolbox and not just a few limited items. And that is really, really something I want to share.

And then the last thing I would say, which is kind of fun, because it's a mantra of Dr. Keith Weingardt, my original mentor, and he used to call it the ABCs of health and well-being. And the A is – And so this plays into functional medicine. And he was mostly [a] Chinese medicine kind of guy. But he talked about the ABCs, and I was new into holistic and I thought that was so great. And A was for avoid as many offenders that deteriorate health. And for our pets, of course, that's heavily processed foods, high carbohydrate foods, toxins, excess medications, excess vaccines. Avoid as many things as you can to support health. And then the B is build up the body with as many positive things and proactive things and health-supporting tools. And that of course is functional medicine right there, A and B. And then the C was commitment. It's committing to the process. And something that I've learned through 15 years of doing holistic work with pet parents is that I kind of have to set the stage for that with them, too.

Because a lot of times they're like, “Okay, I'm going to invest in this.” My initial consults are 60 minutes long. And by the way, I do a lot of telemedicine, which is amazing. And in today's world of virtual medicine available, it's really so easy now to help people and pets all over the place, all over the world. And so that's wonderful. But I do have to explain to people that in the majority of circumstances, even if you're coming to me for just wellness and good supportive ideas of how to keep your pet healthy, that can be relatively a short process to explain.

But when there's an illness going on and certainly a chronic illness or something that's really significant, I really like people to understand that their pet's not going to totally resolve overnight. But that there is so much optimism always from me because the majority of the patients that come to me either completely resolve or get a whole lot better, even from autoimmune conditions and IBD (inflammatory bowel disease) and things that western conventional medicine doctors have told them are lifelong and their pet's always going to have it and never get rid of it.

So, I always paint optimism. But also, a commitment to the process because one conversation or one exam visit or one thing is not going to take them from A to Z. And so, I love everybody to know that whether you're in prevention, this is a commitment for a lifelong process. Let's stay healthy, let's be proactive. Or whether you're treating an issue, it's also a commitment to the process because it's going to take some time and a little bit of effort.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And very wise words. You're setting expectations, but you're also – what I have told my clients is, “How long did it take your pet to get in this situation?” They say, two years. And I'm like, “Right, and I'm one of your guides out of it, but we're going to commit.” It is not going to get better next week. But for the two years that we are restoring health, we are giving this body that opportunity to actually have this functional response to not just restore to where they were, but to become healthier than they were before they got sick. So, the goal is to set that expectation, and you do a fabulous job of doing that. Now, everyone-

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Thank you. Can I say one thing that matches what you just said, which just came to my mind, is that they're healthier than before the disease or at least before the disease process was recognized, right? And I give presentations and lectures and stuff, too. And I have a picture of a doggy who is one of my heartfelt faith patients, whose name is Cuda. And he did pass last year when he was 14 or 15. And I have a picture of him that goes in some of my presentations because he's got this big smile on his face and a birthday hat with the number 13 on it. Or wait, no, the number 11. I've known him for years. And when his mom drove from an hour and a half away she lives from my practice, and she drove to me on his birthday, she didn't even have an appointment. So she drove three hours to bring him because she said, "It's his 11th birthday and he is healthier at 11 than he was at 9 when I met you. And I wanted you to be able to be here to celebrate with us, and I knew that you would want to." And she literally brought him down and we just gushed on him and took pictures and gave him treats and-

Dr. Karen Becker:

So awesome.

Dr. Katie Kangas:

So, it's like the perfect epitome, demonstration, of what you just put into great words.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And I think that those repeated cases that we have the honor of being able to care for, they don't just feed our – that's the fire that keeps us going. We have hard jobs. Those animals that other veterinarians were confused about what to do. And this really is a plea to our conventional colleagues that, listen, if you are at the end of your rope and you don't know what to do with the case, get in contact with functional medicine veterinarians. Because just as Dr. Katie was mentored, and I have been mentored by many, many people in my life, there are people out there that can support you and take your hand and help you learn skills that we did not graduate vet school learning. So that's my plug for conventional vets that think, "I have never had an autoimmune case recover. I've never cured a case of cancer. I've never fixed an allergic patient." There are options out there that we did not learn about in vet school that are available to you. And we have a whole growing body of professionals worldwide that are here to support you. So that's my plug for integrative functional medicine.

Dr. Katie, everyone's going to ask, "I don't have a proactive functional wellness veterinarian around me. I would like to know about her website." So, before we sign off, can you tell us where people can follow you or visit you online, social media or website?

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Absolutely. Thank you so much. Our website is – The name of my practice is Integrative Veterinary Care. We don't want to make anybody try and spell integrative. It is a difficult, difficult task there. So it's I-N-T, Int, Vet Care. So intvetcare.com is our website. And people can email us at intvetcare@gmail.com. And our Facebook page is Integrative Veterinary Care. So-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Beautiful.

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Those are good ways to reach us. And thank you, thank you for asking to share that. And I also just want to extend huge appreciation and admiration to you, Karen, for being such a resource for all of us, not just pet parents. By the way, as you know, I have your books here. I share articles. It's so easy because I have so much going on in my busy practice that when people ask me questions that begs more of a description. I'm like, "Here's an article from Dr. Karen Becker."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Aw, thank you.

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Check this out. I mean, it is just so valuable to have you as a resource for the world, honestly. And I want to thank you for paving the way for so many of us holistic veterinarians, and you've done just such a graceful and beautiful job of it. So, thank you so much.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, thank you for [the] incredible kind words. It's exactly why I have produced the content, is that I needed it because I couldn't say it in the hour-long appointments that we have. And my goal is to help as many of my colleagues do their jobs easier by whatever I can offer. And so, thank you for using those resources that are available. I'd also like to say thank you for waking up every day and inspiring the people around you, both pet patients, clients and fellow veterinarians. And I'd also like to thank Paula who nominated you for your Game Changer Award. So, we appreciate you taking time today out of your busy schedule. And we would like to say congratulations once more on your Game Changer nomination.

Dr. Katie Kangas:

Thank you so much. Such an honor.