

Overcoming All Odds to Care for Dogs Living in the Streets

A Special Interview With Tamara Johnston

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so excited that Susan has nominated Tamara Johnston for a Game Changer award. We have Tamara here with us this morning to tell us all about the incredible work she's doing. Congratulations, Tamara, on your Game Changer nomination. We're so excited to learn more about this incredible work. Thank you for joining us. Tamara, tell me a little bit about the work that you're doing and how you got started doing it.

Tamara Johnston:

Sure. It started probably way back in 2002, when I first found my beautiful little puppy, she was just one month old, outside a temple. She would've been run over or poisoned or killed. I took her in, and then basically that started my love of Thai dogs. She was my first-ever dog, actually. Family members have had dogs, but we never owned a dog. From that, she became my life, of course. When she was 3 years old, we moved to Australia from Thailand, and then that was a long process. We lived in Malaysia for six months, and then she had one-month quarantine in Australia.

Then once we went back to Australia, I went back teaching, but then I was backwards and forwards to Thailand, because I just wanted to continue to help the dogs here. Every school holidays, or I would take long service leave, I'd come and help dogs. My heart was drawing me back here. But taking a dog from Thailand to Australia and then back to Thailand again is not an easy decision. In the end, I decided that I needed to come back. That's when I came back and started Thai Street Paws Rescue, and all because of this one little puppy. She's passed away now. She was 17. She passed away two years ago. When she left me, I promised her I would continue doing this and continue helping the dogs here in Thailand, and in particular our town where I found her.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Gosh. What an incredible – it's an incredible story. I have so many questions. When you came back, because I believe you went as a school teacher and then recognized the depth and the breadth of the dog, the homeless dog, the way that they were treated. And you didn't know you were going to be switching professions, but you moved back to become a full-time rescuer. The process of getting a rescue started from nothing had to have been slightly overwhelming.

Tamara Johnston:

It was very overwhelming. It started just with a few dogs, actually. I was feeding and sterilizing, vaccinating dogs. And then some dogs were poisoned along a road beside my home, and I decided, "Okay, the rest of the dogs can't stay there." So, I admitted them to a vet clinic, and then we opened our foster home. And then it just – you know, I was like, "It's getting too big, and now it's bigger than ever." But I was still trying to juggle some part-time teaching, and I'd be having to cancel last-minute because I'm at the vet with a sick dog. So, I was like, "Okay, this is

not going to work.”

I still do some random days teaching at a university, but every day is dogs. Every day is waking up and, whether it's being at my sanctuary, going out to do spay and neuter, vaccinations. So, my whole life revolves around the rescue now. So, it's changed a lot.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Gosh. Tell me a little bit about – you're working amidst a culture that has a lot of homeless animals, starving animals, but also misunderstood. The dogs are very misunderstood. Are you seeing an evolution of cultural change where people are beginning to recognize the why of what you do, or do you feel like, generally speaking, there's still a lot of harshness and misunderstanding pertaining to dogs where you're at?

Tamara Johnston:

Yeah. That's a good question, because where I am too is a high population of Muslims. This becomes difficult because, obviously, they don't like dogs. Some of them do, but they don't want them in the area. And then, I understand that – I try to get across to them, I'm trying to help you with spay and neuter and vaccinations. And they're like, "Just take the dog, take the dog, we don't want the dog." But they don't understand that I can't take every dog. So, I'm trying to educate and trying to provide what I can.

Sometimes it feels like I'm banging my head against a brick wall, and I go, “When is this ever going to change? I don't think it's going to change.” But I think I can see a slight change in things when people come to me and ask me, "Can you please take my dog to be spayed or neutered?" And parvo and distemper are very big where we are. So, this is a kind of a thing that I'm not, you know, vaccine or vaccinating, but it's essential here.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Of course, of course.

Tamara Johnston:

When they come to me and they ask me for help with skin problems or ticks or sterilization, vaccination, for me, that's a win. And when they want the dog back, that's a bigger win. So, I always say, "I'm more than happy to help you, but I can't take your dog," unless it's an extreme case. So, I do feel like we are, slightly.

Dr. Karen Becker:

As you are helping people, educating people about how to care for dogs, how to prevent disease, how to prevent additional puppies from entering the world, when you have rescued these animals, then are they up for adoption? Are you trying to place them? Are you trying to get them out of the country and into areas where there's a more warm and welcoming environment for these dogs? What's the process of then trying to re-home the dogs that you've saved?

Tamara Johnston:

Yeah. We do. That is the end goal. Adopting locally is very, very rare. If I put a call out for fosters, like, we had four orphaned puppies because the mom was killed. They were two days old, and trying to find a foster was almost impossible. So, adoptions, locally, don't really happen. I have done a few adoptions locally, but most of ours were abroad. But of course, we were adopting to the U.S. with partner rescues, and Canada. But these rules are changing now. And Europe is still okay. We do the rabies titer and we can send them to Europe.

The problem is that I guess during COVID, I became so busy with so many starving dogs on the street, and we took in a lot. There just wasn't the food source for them. And now our sanctuary is overflowing. We're actually in the process of building a new place we're meant to be in by the end of the month. But our funds are pretty bad right now, because we have – I think we look after 250 dogs every day.

Dr. Karen Becker:

My gosh.

Tamara Johnston:

Yeah, it's so many.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Do you have volunteers? Are there some local volunteers that understand your heart, your mission, your goal?

Tamara Johnston:

Local, not so much. We have a small school community at the international school, that have just said they would like to start to help out more and trying to get their students to come in and help. But we relied previously like 100% on volunteers, and then COVID hit, and there's no volunteers. So I've had to employ local people, but that's also difficult, because their mindset and my mindset about how animals – the basic needs are very different. So yeah, it's really tough.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Do the veterinarians in the area ... Obviously, the local veterinarians love animals, hopefully. That's why they became vets. Do they understand your mission and your goals? Do you have some camaraderie with the veterinarians you're working with, or do even the veterinarians think, "My goodness, this woman's a little dog crazy?"

Tamara Johnston:

I'm sure they all do. But I have one that I use for everything, and he's amazing. He is very big into spay and neuter. He is phenomenal in what he does. He understands, and he has done some amazing surgeries. We have one dog, somebody cut off the nose with a machete. He'd never seen a case like this, but he went home and he researched and he told me, "I can do this surgery." And he did. He did an amazing job. I am very lucky to have such a talented vet. He understands me when – I'll go in and I'm like, "I want to get dogs today for spay and neuter," and then I'll come back and I'm like, "I've got three, I've got three," and he's just as happy as I am, and they've taken me three hours to catch. So, he really gets it, and I really appreciate that.

And it is difficult. I'm lucky that I do have a very good vet like that, because not everywhere in Thailand is like that. We are still at times – you know, I need to go to Bangkok or somewhere else to get more advice. But I'm very lucky with the vet that I have.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, you are. That's a blessing-

Tamara Johnston:

It's a great thing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

-that you have one comrade in the trenches that's of medical mindset to be able to help you with those profound cases of disease and abuse and neglect.

Tamara Johnston:

Absolutely.

Dr. Karen Becker:

This is a series of pretty – you're a resilient soul, my friend. You're a strong, strong human.

Tamara Johnston:

Have to be.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, you do have to be. You have to be strong in lots of ways to do what you do. And what you are doing is amazing. When you get up in the morning, Tamara, the typical question I ask is, “What do you love most about your job?” I know that you love what you're doing. You are living in a foreign country working in very difficult circumstances. This is your heart and soul. That's very obvious. But I think love maybe isn't the right term. What motivates you? What is the reason that you get up every morning and do what you do? What is your reason for this?

Tamara Johnston:

Yeah. Obviously, it comes back to my Bella because she was the reason that I started this. When she passed away, she was passing away in my arms, I promised her that I'm going to continue caring for your friends here and I'm not going to give up. And there's so many times lately where I'm just like, I just want to go home, it's too hard, the cultural difference is too hard, people are ripping me off and I don't have enough money and I'm tired and I don't get a day off. And then I go and I feed my street dogs, and I'm like, “What would they do if I'm not here?” I come home to my dogs, and yeah, they drive me crazy sometimes but walking away from that is not easy either. So, I have to just find a way to keep going. I need to find a balance. There's someone now wanting to get in the room. Frosty.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Tamara, in the place that you live, and your dogs versus the dogs that you're feeding and caring for, how many dogs are in your space right now?

Tamara Johnston:

Okay. In my home there's 15 right now. I told myself it wouldn't go over like five, but here we are at 15.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I understand. I totally understand. Tamara, if you could tell the world one thing, or if you would want the world to know one thing, what would it be?

Tamara Johnston:

I think I just want people to be more compassionate with living beings that have no choice. They don't want to be here. I look at these little puppies, and I'm like, "They didn't ask to be born, and they didn't ask to be abused or poisoned." I think, sometimes, we've lost touch with reality. We're all living beings, and let's be nice to everything on the planet, and respect them and try to help where we can. When I see people with not a lot of money and they're really trying to help, that makes me happy.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, yeah. Compassion is an important piece, it's the most important piece, of us taking care of each other and taking care of the other inhabitants on the earth. You've moved to another country to care for animals there, and it's amazing. Tamara, if people wanted to support your work, to donate to your work, to learn more about what you're doing and your mission, where would they go to find that information?

Tamara Johnston:

Sure. We have a Facebook page. It's called Thai Street Paws Rescue. We also have Instagram, and I think it's the same name. I think it's Thai Street Paws Dog Rescue on Instagram. Yeah, that's the best place to find us and reach out. And you know, everything helps. Sharing helps, \$1 helps. Every bit helps to keep going.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, it does. The whole reason that the Game Changer Series exists is to shed light and to bring light and awareness to this important work that all of these amazing Game Changers are doing around the world, you being one of them. It's such an honor to be able to connect with, to learn more about this critical work that you're doing. My hope and prayer is that people see this, recognize the need, and then feel compassion, and in turn want to support you and the work that you're doing. So thank you for all that you're doing.

Tamara Johnston:

Thank you. I'm so honored because you're one of my heroes. I'm so honored to actually meet you and to talk to you and for you to interview me. You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you so much.