

Providing Care for Elder Dogs: A Special Interview With Karen Cole

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker. And today I'm so excited that Karen Cole is joining me. Terry has nominated her for a Game Changer award and she's joining me this morning to tell me more about her amazing organization. Welcome Karen, and congratulations on your Game Changer nomination.

Karen Cole:

Thank you very much. I appreciate the nomination. So my mission is I have an elder care hospice for dogs called Lizzy's Animal Hospice. We take dogs typically 10 years and older or younger dogs who are terminally ill or have mobility issues. And our goal is to get them as healthy as possible and find them great homes. And if they can't get healthy, then they stay with us. And we are foster-based, so dogs live in a home environment, they're part of a family. We don't have a shelter environment. We thought it was important for them to be a part of a family, be in a home.

Karen Cole:

Some of our dogs, I just got a dog off the chain after 10 years. And so he's learning to acclimate, but it's sort of difficult because there are more dogs and it's an inside environment. And it's an exciting adventure.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And Karen, back up and tell me a little bit about how this came to be. There had to be – obviously, there was a Lizzy. Tell us a little bit about how you started in to this amazing program.

Karen Cole:

I was with a rescue for – well first, I found a dog and that brought me to a wonderful rescue who I eventually joined the board because I was so appreciative of their help. And I noticed that we didn't have any older dogs. And so I said, "Let's, go the shelter and pull the 10-year-old, the 8-year-old, the 12-year-old." And they said, "No, they're not adoptable and they're expensive. Keep walking." So I just say, "Okay, I'll do my own thing." Because those are the only ones. When you walk into shelters, they're the ones that everybody walks by and they're great. They're already trained, they're happy. They have lived a good life and they have a good life to live further.

Karen Cole:

So that's when I started Lizzy's. Lizzy though was, I mentioned, a chain dog. And it's a very sad story. Somebody found Lizzy – they heard Lizzy actually howling and went to [inaudible 00:02:23] and she was chained to a tree. A friend got a call. We went over there and I told her, I

said, "The two gentlemen did agree to let us have Lizzy." And brought her in. And she was in such bad shape. We thought maybe she would have two weeks and got all the hair – she had so much hair on her, she couldn't even stand up. And got all the hair shaved down, got her to the vet. And she lived for [inaudible 00:02:53]. So that's how she got namesake.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Oh, that's beautiful. And Karen when you found Lizzy and when this kind of rattled your soul. And you said, "You know what? This is an unfilled mission in my area, adopting older unadoptable dogs that need homes." It's so interesting because it's not uncommon I have found, in shelters where of course the younger animals get homes faster. But that doesn't mean that there's not this amazing community of people that are more than willing and happy and able to adopt older animals or terminal animals. So talk a little bit about how you get the word out that these older animals, or maybe animals with special needs, need homes? You have a team of volunteers, obviously that help you as well as foster homes at the same time?

Karen Cole:

Yes, my volunteers help me do meet and greets. We also do a lot on Facebook. We post on PetFinder.com, all of our dogs. And what I found is, like you said, a community of older people who say they don't want a dog for 10 to 12 years, they are good with two to five. And then we have people who just the other day, or a couple of weeks ago, I adopted a dog that had DM. What it is, is the dog's eventually going to be paralyzed completely. And his backend is paralyzed now. And she said, "But this is what I do. I'm a nurse. And I take dogs like this, give them a good life." and she sent me a video the other day and he was in his wheels and in the lake. And not a lake in a, sorry, in the stream, just water. Where he could just romp around and have fun with other dogs.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Enjoying.

Karen Cole:

Yes exactly.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Isn't that just wonderful. There are – superior people adopt dogs, but extraordinary humans take these dogs with a little bit higher needs, or older animals or terminals. So it's so inspiring to meet the people who are excited to provide care for the rest of these animal's life. It's just so wonderful. Do you also receive calls from dogs like Lizzy that need to be rescued? Or is it primarily your organization going out and finding older dogs and shelters? Or a combination of both?

Karen Cole:

I take very [inaudible 00:05:24] from owners. If it's a situation where the owners pass away, or the owners going into a living facility, then I will take the dog. There are – it's very seldom will I take a dog. Sometimes I do take a dog that the people just don't want it anymore. That the dog peed on the carpet and they just bought a new house and they don't give the dog a chance to

acclimate. I know that dog is going to head to the shelter. So in that case, I will bring that dog in if we have the room.

Karen Cole:

And that's the key, we're foster-based. And we're very small. Lizzy's is a very small organization, but I like it to stay small. I like it to stay personal. People who know Lizzy's, know me so they can put up face with the name of the group. But we don't get a lot of grants because of that, because we're small. So that helps that people know they can put a face with a group. So when I just had a plea for a \$4,000 surgery that's coming up end of the month. And so I've created those relationships where people are willing to help out a little bit more, as opposed to a larger organization who can get grants. Can get them easily because they have a bigger platform than I do.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, I totally understand that. And that's one of my goals in doing these Game Changer interviews is to help people just like yourself with wild passion in their heart, help get the word out about the amazing work that you're doing. So I love these stories. And I'm sure that prior to you meeting Lizzy, of course you loved animals, but you probably had no idea that your life would go in this direction, in the sense that you have this unbelievable mission of helping unadoptable, older animals have forever homes that are magical until the day that they depart. It's a fantastic thing that you're doing. I have to assume that when you get up in the morning you know in your heart, how much good you're doing. But what do you love most, Karen, about the work that you're doing?

Karen Cole:

I love the success stories. I love the dogs that were so down and out where you're like, "I'm just not really sure, but we'll give it our best." And then we can get them healthy. Sometimes it's just a few days, they just needed a couple of days to acclimate and they just were found on the side of the road and they just needed to be able to breathe. And then you find this fantastic home. I actually had one that I placed, a little dog, and the next night he didn't do well. And I placed him in a home. And I said, "I'm going to take him back. I'm not sure." And I thought by the morning he was going to be gone. And he perked back up.

Karen Cole:

Took him to the vet. And the vet's like, "Yes, he's in kidney failure. He is in heart failure. He's in renal failure, he's in everything failure." And so I told the adopters, I said, "I understand you didn't sign up for hospice, but this is a situation and you don't have to take him back. I'll keep him and I'll do hospice." And they're like, "No, we'll take him through hospice." But he lived for another two years.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wow, wow.

Karen Cole:

So that's a good thing. Yeah, she was on top of it every day, she made notes. So when she went to the vet, she said, "Here's what we did today, here's what we did yesterday." And so they were able to monitor it and keep and make sure that his meds were right on spot. So for two years they had him. That's a good thing.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Isn't it – it is incredibly inspiring to, you know, that these animals just being older, they're going to have probably some innate medical issues. But even once they get that diagnosis of being terminal and veterinarians of course we give our best attempt at giving an honest and transparent prognosis. But then, with great care and a lot of love and very focused energy and love and support around that animal, it is remarkable how well many animals can do as they're dying.

Karen Cole:

Yes, yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And you understand that because you see it every day. And it's really part of the amazing thing to watch is the relationship with this animal who's rising up and rallying and doing unbelievably well. And then the love of these brand new guardians taking care of that animal. Your heart has to be very full.

Karen Cole:

Yeah. I think for me too, it's an honor to take care of the dogs. Sometimes I have a dog through two or three days. Sometimes I have them for two weeks. And I think it's an honor to be able to take care of them.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, yeah, yep. And you being able to show the value left in older animals' lives or terminal animal. That just because that timeframe is shorter, it doesn't make it any less relevant. And I really appreciate your mission of talking about whatever time is remaining is of value and worthwhile of saving. I think that that's really important and I love that. If you could let the world know one thing about what you're doing Karen, what would it be?

Karen Cole:

I would like people to respect their senior dogs. That's what I would like.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Yeah.

Karen Cole:

That would be the one thing. And if you want to support a great cause I would love for you to support Lizzy's. We need all the help we can get because the seniors need all the help they can get.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And if people wanted to learn more about the dogs that could be available to adopt or to financially support you, or to begin working with Lizzy's, where would they go, Karen, to get more information?

Karen Cole:

Our website is LizzysHospice.com and it's L-I-Z-Z-Y-S-H-O-S-P-I-C-E.com. A lot of people do IES. So it's Y-S. And that's our website, but if you have questions you can email me at LizzysHospice@gmail.com.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So good. And social media?

Karen Cole:

We are on Facebook. We are now on Instagram. Those are the only two, mostly. We have somebody who's trying to do volunteers again. I'm trying to find somebody who knows how to do TikTok. So anybody knows.

Dr. Karen Becker:

I totally get that. I certainly don't know how to – that is not in my wheelhouse at all. What is your Facebook? Where can people find you on Facebook and Instagram?

Karen Cole:

Lizzy's Hospice.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Good. Okay, perfect. Well, I love the fact that seniors and potentially terminal seniors, have become your passion. I love the fact that you are all in and saving the animals in your local area, especially those animals that would be more difficult to place. I am wildly inspired by the work that you're doing. And I hope that this interview helps gets the word out about the magnificent things that you're doing. I'm so thankful that Terry nominated you for a Game Changer Award.

Karen Cole:

Me too. It's great to meet you. Thank you for the opportunity.