

# **Surrounding Homeless Hospice Dogs With Love in Their Final Chapter**

## **A Special Interview With Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby**

**By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so thankful that Briana has nominated Reverend Sarah Whitten[-Grigsby] for a Game Changer award. And Sarah has taken time out of her day today to join me and walk us through the beautiful gift that she has set up, that she's created passion from her heart for a very beautiful and much-needed reason. So thank you, Sarah, for joining me today, and congratulations on your Game Changer award.

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

Thank you, and thank you so much for having me.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

So, I have been able to visit your website and I know a little bit about what you do and why, but for our listeners or readers that don't know about your passion project, will you just walk us through how the inspiration came to you and then what you needed to do to get this to fruition in terms of it being a beautiful platform that is giving amazing quality of life for a minute, day, hour, week or month to dogs that need it?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

So, I am an interfaith reverend with an animal specialty, and I have a small foundation, which places homeless hospice dogs in loving forever homes. And what happened was I was of an age where I was losing loved ones, and when that was happening, my dogs were a big part of what was healing me, absolutely. And I think anyone who has a dog is probably nodding vehemently at this point. So, I wanted to give back. And actually, having been with each of my parents at last breath, I thought, "How can we do this for dogs?" Dogs give us everything, and I feel that we owe them. If dogs are given the chance, they will stay with us through our last breath, of course.

But sometimes they are abandoned, surrendered or orphaned. There are so many different circumstances in which a dog that is senior and has a life-limiting, non-treatable illness winds up in a shelter or at a rescue or on the street where it's found. So, I googled all this and I discovered that people were doing something, of course, called "fospice," which means foster hospice. And I think it's the tiniest bit misleading because we think of foster as temporary, and our commitment to these dogs is throughout last breath, but it's a good word and it's on the back of our T-shirts and people ask what it is, which gives us a great opportunity to describe that.

So, I had been wanting to find a way to be with dogs throughout last breath, and with a partner, I slowly created a foundation. It took us about a year to get going, to get some sort of reputation where people would say, "Oh, go to Reverend Sarah. She will take care of this dog." So what we

do is partner with rescues and shelters, many, and we're in southwest Florida, so it's mostly local. And they will reach out to me when a dog is brought to them or a dog is found that is senior and has a terminal illness. And then, once that dog has essentially qualified for fospice, because we're very specific about that niche, we post them on our Facebook page. And what is miraculous is the angels who appear.

So, these angels I call fospice guardians – I don't like the word “owner” when you're talking about animals. I feel as if we can't own a dog any more than we can own the sea or the sky. And so, guardians seem like a wonderful way to talk about someone who's really shepherding a dog also through the last chapter. Some of the dogs come back to life. Many of them do and have a year or two. We've had a couple that lasted for three years. And some of the dogs, by the time we get them, really only have a week or a little bit more than that, and that's very, very painful. And people will say, “I could never do what you do.” And I always think to myself, “I could never do what I do neither,” because I never downplay how difficult it is, but also enormously rewarding.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And for the animal dying, [there's] no better gift and honor [than] to be with a dying animal that otherwise would have died alone. And so, it's also so necessary. It's a necessary gift for our blessed dogs. So, it's really a fantastic way of honoring dogs that deserve to be honored. So, as you started to build your foster family-

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

Yes.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

-did you just put out a social media plea? How did you go about collecting your angels?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

It started as word of mouth, but definitely, Facebook or Meta, I guess I should say, was a big part of how we got the word out. And I live in a smallish community, so I was volunteering for the Humane Society, so they immediately started spreading the word. And so, a lot of it has indeed been word of mouth, but I'm working with a lot of rescues now that one at a time we might reach out to someone and say, “We saw this dog posted, can we help?” And then, we would in due course become official partners of that rescue. So, that was how the rescues and shelters grew with us in partnership.

But I thought, initially, I had a picture that we would have like a stable of volunteers waiting to get a dog. And it didn't unfold that way. It unfolded that a dog would come to us and we would post, and then someone would respond or several people would respond. And of course, we have an application process. But I also listened to my instincts all the time. I believe that I think you can tell when somebody's going to be a really wonderful fospice guardian. And the people that I have met and worked with in the last – it's been seven years since I founded One More Day – are amazing to me. Some of them are on their fourth dog for us, one dog at a time. But needless to

say, it's emotionally difficult work, and yet there are these incredible human beings who are willing to step up and go through that more than once.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes. Angels are resilient. I am not a reverend, but you know that better than anyone. What a wonderful thing. Have you ever, Sarah, been in a situation where you needed more guardians and there was not enough? Or no, when you have put out a plea, you have been able to place a dog when it needs to be placed? Has it worked that way?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

It works that way I want to say 80% of the time. And maybe 20% of the time, someone doesn't step up and I feel as if we've failed, but that is unusual, I find. And that's what has been so amazing, that I keep thinking, "Oh, this is an incredibly difficult case and no one's going to step up." And then, people do. So, for the most part, we're successful, I feel. Occasionally not, but that is the exception.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Wonderful. Okay, so a couple of different questions. First of all, because you have demonstrated [a] kind of proof of heart concept and it's working, terminal dogs are finding beautiful places to take their last breath with loving families, have you had other either counties or states or individuals ask to emulate your program or not yet? Because I think that that would be coming.

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

It's interesting that you ask that. That's a wonderful question. I am aware that people in this area are using the term fospice a lot more, they know what it is. And we have one partner rescue we're especially close to and work with frequently, who's actually maybe only half an hour from us, and in addition to placing all kinds of dogs in all kinds of conditions and situations, she has also started placing fospice dogs. And she often collaborates with me or talks with me about it first, so that we can help each other and get each other's advice. And it's a wonderful, wonderful collaboration. But maybe that part is slow to unfold otherwise.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And because there's only one of you and because it certainly would take some mentorship, those others will show up when you have time and space to be able to support their needs.

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

Definitely, definitely.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. So, a couple different things. Logistically, if people say, “Oh my gosh, brilliant, how do I donate, learn more, become a guardian?” If people wanted to learn more about what you're doing, do you have a website? Is it by social media or website? How do people best get in contact with you?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

We have a website, OneMoreDayFoundation.com. But I like people to email me. I really like people to email me, which is onemoredayfoundationinc@gmail.com. And then, I can really give substantial information. They will see a lot of what we do on the Facebook page. I was doing webcasts and I'm just about to start them again. And that way, I could answer a lot of questions. So basically, we are always looking for donations.

We're entirely privately funded, as you would imagine. And we're always looking for fospice guardians. Those are the two things we must have — fospice guardians and donations. So, you can give through the website and via PayPal. And that's probably the best way, I feel, to donate. And I am amazed because I must say that those donations keep gently trickling in all the time, even sometimes when I'm not asking, which is very gratifying because I know that people believe in this work and this work comes from the deepest recesses of my heart.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes. What do you love most about this gift that you're able to provide to dogs?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

It is incredibly rewarding. It is mutually healing. So, I asked some fospice guardians to write testimonials a couple of years ago for our Christmas mailing, holiday mailing, and they wrote amazing things about how their fospice dog changed their life. I had a senior woman, lovely woman – and certainly plenty of seniors are fospice guardians, but also young people. And she said, “This dog, Lucky,” she had renamed him, “is the best thing that's ever happened to me.” And those stories of happiness and love and joy and reward, of course, are really what make it worthwhile. And there are so many of those uplifting stories. And we need upliftment in this day and age.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, we do. It's mutually transformative, I think is the phrase I would use because, of course, for a dog to be able to die well, surrounded by love, is the best gift we could give them. But the lessons for us, being able to support them through that process, people underestimate how much we are able to grow and transform and evolve and work on ourselves and expand our consciousness doing hard volunteer jobs. Emotionally hard jobs sometimes lead to the best growth, and what an amazing opportunity.

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

That's perfectly said. That's exactly true. And when someone says, "How can you do what you do?" I can say it is enormously, immeasurably rewarding.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. Yes. And I understand that, being a veterinarian that euthanizes beloved souls as a big part of her job, there's no more difficult task and yet that is the most important thing I can do. And so, I get that, and I understand the depth and breadth of being able to recognize what an honor it is and the growth that occurs interpersonally with us and our own souls being able to be a part of that experience. So, it's wonderful that you're building a network of volunteers that are also becoming wiser and deeper and more evolved humans because of their volunteer work with you, which is fantastic. It is a win-win situation for everyone.

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

Yes.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

So first of all, if you think back to the day that this idea, this passion was started in your soul, would you ever have thought you would be where you're at now?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

No, I don't think so. I mean, I certainly had hopes for its success. I went into it with a very positive attitude. But now that we have a positive reputation and people are coming to us with dogs in need, it's very gratifying, for want of a better word.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

For sure. So-

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

And I also feel – Sorry, go ahead.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

No, please.

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

I was just going to say, I also feel the enormity of the loss, and sometimes it's a dog I haven't even met, but I always feel that departure and spend some time with a bit of grief counseling with my fospice guardians. And I've written a tiny book called "The Staggering Loss of Your

Dog: Some Ways to Get Through” to help people navigate the loss of a dog and to know that even though it is so enormously painful, you're not going crazy. Millions of us feel that way.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. And that's a really beautiful gift, especially if you have volunteers, guardians that have maybe not been through loss before. It's wonderful that you're a reverend, and it's wonderful that you provide emotional, mental, spiritual support, both physically being there with your words and your actions, but also it's wonderful that you have some written materials so that everyone that is dealing with grief has some means of knowing that they are supported through the process, because it's a thing.

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

It is a thing. Here's the book.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Good. Thank you. And thank you for – And is it available?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

Available on-

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Is it on Amazon or a website or?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

It's available on Amazon and they're creating a little website, but that website's not up yet, but this is available on Amazon.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

On Amazon. Okay, wonderful. Yeah, that's great. So, when you think about where you're at this far in your life and what you've done meshing your love for people, your love for animals, your love for souls together, if you could share one thing from your heart, a tip or trick or idea or thought or concept or wise words, what would it be?

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

I believe it would be to say that if we humans can have loving respect for all the non-human sentient beings, and in this case particularly dogs, but all creatures, the world will be a better place. I really believe that. I think what you said that it is transformative absolutely addresses the fact that we become better people when we do this work and then the world becomes a better

place. And that sounds enormous, but it's very universal. But I really truly think that when we are kind and compassionate, those ripples indeed go outward.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. Wise words. I am so thankful that Briana, who I know – Rarely do I have the honor of knowing the nominator of our awesome Game Changers, but I know Briana, and I'm so thankful that she took the time to nominate you. And I am so thankful that the seed of inspiration for this wonderful concept was planted in your soul and that you were brave enough to say, “I'm going to do this,” and then you did it because the gift you're giving to the animal kingdom, both two- and four-legged is magnificent. So, thank you for taking time today to tell us more about your work.

**Rev. Sarah Whitten-Grigsby:**

You're so welcome, and thank you again for having me.