In 2004, I felt the first pangs of burnout. I took a break from being a veterinary nurse, transitioning to the front desk and going back to school to finish my bachelor’s degree in history. I thought I was done, but staying in the field during that time allowed me to reevaluate my career goals and I ended up returning to my work as a veterinary nurse after graduation.

Changing Animal Welfare on Native Reservations

Erin has a degree in veterinary technology (2001) and a master’s degree in education (2015). She earned her veterinary technician specialty in emergency and critical care in 2011. In 2009, Erin began volunteering with the Rural Area Veterinary Services program; in 2012, she accepted a full-time role. Erin spends 4 weeks each summer participating in field clinics on Native reservations in western states. Currently an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts Veterinary Technology program, Erin is past president of the Massachusetts Veterinary Technician Association and the current president of National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA).
I kept the burnout at arm’s length by taking on new, challenging roles in the hospital. By 2008, I was an assistant supervisor in the emergency department, but I was slowly heading back to being physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted at work. This concerned me—this was no longer just a job; it was my career.

Then it all changed. One night, I overheard a veterinarian telling a fellow veterinary nurse about a field clinic she had just returned from. I asked a few questions and within a couple weeks I was placed on the roster for a trip with Rural Area Veterinary Services (RAVS). In the summer of 2009, I flew out to North Dakota to meet 50 strangers. Somehow, we were all going to run a veterinary clinic out of a gym for a week. It was a trip that changed my life.

WHAT IS RAVS?
RAVS is a combination of things. First and foremost, it is a service program that provides free veterinary care to underserved, remote communities located in Native American reservations throughout the western United States. The program also has a teaching component. Each clinic has veterinary and veterinary technology students who are able to practice their skills under the guidance of staff and volunteer veterinarians and veterinary nurses.

Finally, as a veterinary nurse, I found RAVS to be an example of how veterinary nurses can be utilized to their fullest extent. On my first trip, I was given the role of “walking the line.” This basically means I oversaw the student anesthetists at each of five surgery tables. I was given the protocols that had been set by the staff veterinary team and then was allowed to draw upon my knowledge and skill set to make decisions within those protocols to address anesthetic issues that arose. Though I was utilized at the hospital where I worked, the veterinary team at the RAVS clinic trusted my skill set at a whole new level. Since that first trip, I have witnessed countless veterinary nurse and assistant volunteers have eye-opening and life-changing experiences just as I did. This is a major reason I continue to work at RAVS clinics and to encourage veterinary nurses to join a RAVS trip.

IDENTIFY YOUR PASSION
A major responsibility of a professional volunteer or staff member on a RAVS trip is to educate the students who join us. Veterinarians work one on one with veterinary students in surgery. Veterinarians and veterinary nurses assist students with physical exams and vaccination administration. Veterinary nurses are the primary anesthesia team and work with students on everything from IV catheter placement to troubleshooting anesthetic complications.

Prior to joining RAVS, I had done some lecturing and training in my hospital and liked it, but it was RAVS that made me realize this was my passion. Watching a student place their first IV catheter or correctly assess their patient for the first time gave me a rush that made me remember how much I love veterinary medicine. It is immensely satisfying to watch a student—who on their first day at a RAVS clinic was on the verge of tears and barely able to assess vital signs, never mind record them accurately—develop confidence and skills as an anesthetist. Education became my passion. I went on to earn a Master’s in Education and changed jobs to teach in a veterinary technology program.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN PASSION ELEVATES YOU
Education wasn’t the only thing I discovered, though. Until participating in a RAVS clinic, I had always worked in private practice—primarily in emergency medicine—in an area where most clients could at least afford some treatment for their pets. Working in underserved communities gave me a new perspective on my life and, more importantly, the human-animal bond. Further, I learned that I really like working with the people! The community members are so appreciative that we give their animals much-needed care. Over time, I made a slow transition from a veterinary nurse who was solely focused on the patient with little patience for animals’ owners to someone who embraced the human-animal bond as crucial to treating
WHAT MOVES YOU

the patient and who adopted an empathetic approach to upset and angry clients. This change in attitude has kept compassion fatigue out of my narrative. When I feel that sort of emotional distress creeping into my life, I have a new outlook that helps me get past it.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN PASSION PROVIDES ENERGY AND STRENGTH

Though there are still times in my career, whether working relief in practice or with students in the veterinary technology program, when I hit a rough patch. The things I have learned about myself and others through RAVS lift and sustain me. When I’d begin to feel emotionally, physically, and mentally drained, my RAVS trips always rejuvenated me.

Of course, eventually I needed more than the trips, and luckily, I was able to let my passion for education carry me into my new role as an instructor in the veterinary technology program and also become a member of the RAVS staff.

I continue to find purpose and strength from the passion RAVS ignited in me 10 years ago. How can you find your passion? Start by identifying things that interest you and then pursue them. You won’t regret it!

If you think volunteering at a RAVS clinic might help you identify your passion, visit the website: ruralareavet.org. TVN