Your television is tuned-in to one of your favorite shows when a familiar commercial appears on the screen. The iconic music of Sarah McLachlan begins to play in the background as you watch haunting images of puppies and kittens caged in horrendous conditions. It’s heartbreaking to imagine how terrified these animals must be, and you wonder how this can be happening in 2019. First, you are sad, and maybe even cry. Then, you become mad and wonder what can be done to change this and help these animals. One of the answers to this question is very simple—you can volunteer!
As veterinary nurses, we dedicate our lives to helping animals of all shapes and sizes because we are animal welfare warriors and are naturally drawn to want to help. Our veterinary skills also make us uniquely qualified to assist with situations like the ones we see in those heartbreaking commercials, and we are very fortunate to have so many opportunities to work and volunteer in such a variety of arenas in our field. You may think that you don’t possibly have the time, but you’re probably already doing a lot of volunteering as part of your everyday life. Most of us take home bottle babies and foster countless puppies, kittens, squirrels, and more.

My career as a CVT started in 1982 after I graduated from St. Petersburg College. I worked in private specialty practice (ophthalmology) and currently work in general practice and with Nestle Purina Petcare. I have been able to take the skills I have learned over the course of my career and use them to help other veterinary professionals and patients as a volunteer.

My volunteer career started in 1989, when I helped develop a pet therapy program at a local hospital. I caution everyone that pet therapy is instantly addicting, but in the best possible way. My pet therapy work continues today with weekly visits at two hospitals with two of my dogs. This led to volunteering with spay/neuter groups doing High-Quality, High-Volume Spay/Neuter Surgery campaigns all over the world with Animal Balance, Humane Society International, and Spayathon for Puerto Rico with the Humane Society of the United States and soon working in Chernobyl with the Clean Futures Fund. I also volunteer locally with the Florida State Animal Response Coalition and Operation Catnip at the University of Florida.

The ASPCA Field Investigations and Response team also has opportunities for individuals interested in the field of animal rescue. You may think that it is heartbreaking, but once you are involved in the care and treatment of these souls, you are completely invested in seeing them succeed. By volunteering, you can get a feel for what it’s all about. If you work in private practice, volunteering will give you a glimpse into the life of shelter medicine. We are uniquely qualified to help in these cases because it’s our life! It’s what we do every day at clinics all around the country.

There are a large variety of cases you may be asked to respond to, such as hoarding, puppy mills, dogfighting, cockfighting, or assistance in disaster response. These cases all have one thing in common—they need veterinary nurses. As you can imagine, these needs can arise quickly. You may be asked to help set up a temporary shelter by assembling crates and cages, setting up medical areas for forensics exams, or setting up quarantine areas. You may also be asked to go on scene and assist with the removal and transport of these animals to a temporary shelter. Whatever area you are assigned, it’s all integral to the care and treatment of these animals. Every job is equally important.

Once animals are in the shelter, there are teams to transition each one into a new life and set them up for success, which results in astounding quality of care. Along with the medical team, there is a behavior team who works closely to ensure each individual animal is treated and enriched as needed. In addition, daily care teams are the critical eyes and ears for these animals and report any concerns. The temporary shelters also include playgroup and exercise coordinators, logistics teams, and even human medical and mental health professionals. Everyone works together for the common goal of seeing these animals move on to new, loving homes.

I have gained so much knowledge from each and every case. One common theme I have seen time and time again is that nurses are a wealth of knowledge and they are awesome at sharing that knowledge. I’ve learned more about Babesia treatment than I ever knew before thanks to volunteering with other veterinary nurses. Together, all of us can create an environment to help these animals gain a better life—one they all deserve.

Volunteer, and it will be the best decision you ever make. To learn more about becoming an ASPCA responder, visit aspca.org/animal-rescue/rescue-work-and-field-deployments.