Shaelyn St. Onge-Cole, RVT, joined the teaching profession to be the professional role model she never had. “When I had gone through school, I was one of the only African American students. And I felt displaced by some of the faculty—I was told that I wasn’t going to be a good vet tech or that I would never really be a vet tech,” says St. Onge-Cole. “I remember how much that impacted me, and I thought, you know, it would be cool if I could get in there and maybe support some of these students who are feeling the same.”
St. Onge-Cole, who has been in the veterinary field for more than 2 decades, worked in general practice and shelter medicine before pursuing a part-time position at Carrington College in San Leandro, California. This career shift led her to Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, where she is entering her seventh year as a veterinary technician instructor.

“There’s a Howard Thurman quote that my family lives by: ‘Don’t ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive,’” she says. “I found that I really enjoy vet med. I love the science; I love the ability to help. But what really makes me come alive is teaching and watching the students go from being people just off the street to being amazing RVTs who can do all of these different skills.

“What I found is throughout the years, no matter how difficult it is—no matter how challenging—it’s that reward of being able to support the next generation in so many different aspects that really makes my heart sing.”

St. Onge-Cole strives to put students first so they not only are prepared with the skills to help patients but also have the self-belief and support structure that is critical to lasting in the field of veterinary medicine.

“Shae has a casual, inviting demeanor, backed by deep academic knowledge and clinical experience,” says Lisa Eshman, DVM, program director of veterinary technology at Foothill College. “She shines in getting to know students—their interests, strengths, and challenges—and she responds in a way that promotes a sense of responsibility. Shae holds students accountable for their own learning but is there every step of the way to encourage, answer questions, and present material in diverse ways to find that ‘aha’ moment.”

St. Onge-Cole loves the moments in class or the lab when concepts begin to click—diagnostic findings begin to make sense or catheter placements become more natural. But it’s the personal lessons she imparts that might make an even longer-lasting impact.

“From the personal standpoint, I really, really advocate for our students to practice self-care. I found that the majority of us who are in a caring field won’t do it. We don’t have time, we don’t think about it. So every class that I have, there are required assignments for the students to do self-care,” says St. Onge-Cole. “We always ask at the end of our quarter for our students to provide anonymous feedback, and one of the students
said how she originally really resented all of the self-care activities because she thought it was busy work. But then she said, ‘After 2 years of you forcing me to take care of myself, I finally realized how important it is. And I’ve now made it part of my everyday life.’

“I know that those students go on and share their experiences with other techs, with coworkers and older techs. So it’s this idea of paying it forward and having them take what they learned and share it with the community. And ultimately, just to build a better vet tech field and a better vet tech community.”

St. Onge-Cole’s mission is to help veterinary medicine become a more diverse field, where anyone with a passion for helping animals can access education and make a difference. She serves as the mentorship/leadership opportunities chair for the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association (MCVMA), which focuses on supporting BIPOC veterinarians, veterinary nurses/technicians, and students. She also established 2 veterinary assistant programs at Foothill College, one of which is at a local alternative high school and another based at a correctional facility.

We spoke with St. Onge-Cole to learn more about her teaching philosophy, the importance of representation and mentoring, and the future of the profession.

TVN: If there’s one thing that you want your students to take away after graduation, what would that be?
ST. ONGE-COLE: I think the best way that I could sum it up is: Be kind. Be kind to yourself, be kind to your coworkers, be kind to your patients. If that is something that we could all do, that would make everything just a little bit easier.

TVN: How important is it for there to be role models and people in leadership positions who are representing the students from different minority groups and for them to see that and know that you have a shared experience?
ST. ONGE-COLE: It’s so important. [When I was younger] I always dreamed about being a veterinarian, and I’d never seen a Black veterinarian. It never occurred to me that it was something realistically I could do. Having people who are representative of you does 2 things. One, it opens the door. It’s like, I can do that. If they did that, I can do that. That’s just so important. Second, it gives people someone to talk to.

I tell my students all the time that I have a history of so much—I have experience with mental illness in my family, depression, suicidal ideations, sexual assault, I was a teenage mother, I was homeless, my father was a drug addict. I have all of this stuff in my background. I tell them, “I may not know exactly what you’re going through, but I’m pretty sure I have some idea.” Being able to talk to somebody who’s doing what you want to do or teaching what you want to know, and who has had similar experiences, makes it so much easier to have that conversation with them.

TVN: If there are students who feel as though they don’t have the support—and they may not have someone like you who can relate—how are they able to find resources when they may not be easily accessible?
ST. ONGE-COLE: That’s one of the things that a lot of organizations are working toward. Reach out to either NAVTA or your state association. There are a lot of other organizations—such as Pawsibilities Vet Med and the MCVMA—that are focused specifically on BIPOC veterinarians and veterinary nurses/technicians to help give them support.

The other thing is reaching out within the clinic. If you are new and you see somebody who you can identify with, just talk to them and say, “Hey, I know you’re super busy, but I’m really struggling with this. What do you think?” And on the other side, this is very important. To my fellow vet techs who are in the field, especially those of color, don’t make new vet techs come to you. Reach out to them and tell them, “Hey, I hear you’re in school, what are you learning? What are you going over? Let’s talk about it.” It’s so hard for our students to build up the courage to talk to people, that it would be so much more beneficial if those seasoned technicians could take just 5 minutes and spend a little bit of time out of their day to really support that younger generation.

I like to say, hurt people either hurt people or recognize that they’ve been hurt. And I never want to have somebody go through that again. We have bullying, we have gossip, we have cattiness in this field. So when some people become those in power, they think, “Ah, I had to go through it. So I’m gonna make everybody else go through it.” I challenge that. I say, “You know what, that sucked. I really, really hated going through that. And I’m going to protect the next generation so that they don’t have to go through that.”
TVN: A big discussion in the profession is retaining credentialed veterinary nurses/technicians and keeping them in the profession. From your perspective as an educator, what is contributing to this issue and what solutions do you see?

ST. ONGE-COLE: First, it’s really hard to go to a job, struggle to make ends meet, and be treated like crap from the clients, be treated like crap from the veterinarians, and be treated like crap from your fellow technicians. If that’s the culture in your clinic, then you really need to think about what your clinic is doing and how you’re supporting your students and your techs in general. There’s been a lot of research on exactly why techs are leaving the field and money is definitely one. To be honest, I think money is probably one of the big things that keeps people from entering the field, because they recognize how little they’ll be able to make. Once they get in the field, it’s all about how they’re treated and utilized. Allowing a technician to do what they should be able to do as a credentialed tech is huge. That’s also one of the reasons why we’re seeing a lot more students go into emergency and critical care fields. Those are the fields where technicians are being utilized. They’re being allowed to do all the things a technician should be doing, whereas in general practice, I have some students who are RVTs, and they just hold the animal while the doctors do everything. [The veterinarians] draw blood, place IV catheters, they do everything. And so it’s like, I did all of this work for nothing.

TVN: How does the veterinary assistant program that you have at Foothill College work?

ST. ONGE-COLE: For quite a while we’ve had an online vet assistant program and it’s asynchronous. But just this past year, I’ve actually started 2 vet assistant programs. One is in a high school in Oakland. It’s actually a high school that I went to and it’s an alternative high school for students who don’t really fit in to the regular school system. Whether that is because they’ve been expelled or they have a history or just don’t fit. And the second one is in Elmwood Correctional Facility. Both of them are a set of 3 courses, and they learn everything that they need to be an entry-level assistant. It’s such an awesome program.

I’m really proud of the students—we are finishing up our last day of the first course tomorrow. The students have presentations and they’re all excited. They’re...
going to teach me how to trim nails and clean ears and stuff like that. I love being able to teach in a correctional facility. If we are not the first veterinary assistant program in a correctional facility in the United States, we are one of the first.

We’re doing it for a couple of reasons. One, it’s been found that whenever you introduce education, you reduce the recidivism rate. Second, these students are going to get out of the facility with bankable skills. They’re going to know basic terminology, how to restrain, how to do physical exams, how to assist in surgery. That is going to allow them to get into a clinic and start working on supporting themselves and their family in a way that they may not have been able to do before. It just totally warms my heart. One of the things that we’re still struggling with, and one of the things that is very frustrating, is that although the students are making moves to change their life, they still are not necessarily going to be eligible to [progress their career and] sit for the VTNE because the vast majority of them do have drug convictions. My hope is at some point down the road we will recognize that just because somebody was stupid and had weed on them, or something like that, doesn’t mean that they can’t be licensed technicians. That’s something we’re still working on. But it’s giving them a pathway into the field and into something they’ve never done before.

**TVN:** Do you have hope that there can be change and positive growth as your students enter the field?

**ST. ONGE-COLE:** Absolutely. I hope that technicians in general are understood, recognized, and utilized for what we bring to the table. I hope that we get to a place in our society where people—all people—are valued for what they bring to the table. I also hope that we get to the point where people understand what it means to have a pet and understand the challenges that come with it—so they are prepared, ready and recognize that they are going to have to pay a certain amount of money for their pet. I think it’s going to take a lot. I do think that there are a lot of people who are working toward improving this field and making it a place where we all feel included and we all feel welcome. I would give all of them a round of applause and say, “Just keep going, keep working at it.” That’s how we’re going to get better—by encouraging everybody to try a little bit harder. It’s going to take everybody thinking a little bit differently, and moving through the world a little bit differently, in a way that’s more supportive and welcoming. — By Andy Zunz  **TVN**