



CLINIC CHAMPION:

Deana Cappucci,
LVT, VTS (Physical Rehabilitation),
CCRVN, CCMT

West Delray Veterinary, Delray Beach, Florida

Deana Cappucci, LVT, VTS (Physical Rehabilitation), CCRVN, CCMT, is a performer at heart. Growing up on Long Island, New York, Cappucci picked up dancing at the age of 5 and never looked back.



The performing arts became a critical part of her life as she focused on lyrical dance and joined a company that competed nationally—including a performance at the famed Carnegie Hall in New York City. She continued to pursue her passion for dance in college, but a part-time gig working at a veterinary clinic to make extra money soon seized her full attention. Cappucci hung up her dance shoes to pursue a career in veterinary medicine.

“Maybe that’s why I’m so passionate. To connect with something so pure through lyrical dance and be able to move and alter your body to the feeling of the music is so freeing,” said Cappucci. “I found that passion working with animals too—it’s amazing that I was able to take one passion that I really enjoyed and find this love for working with animals and helping to improve their lives. It’s a really beautiful thing.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree and passing the VTNE, Cappucci started her career in a specialty emergency hospital. But when her “soul dog,” a shepherd-Labrador retriever mix named Jake, was diagnosed with hip dysplasia, Cappucci became invested in learning more about his condition and therapeutic options.

“That led me down this path of learning more about physical rehabilitation. When I went to school, they weren’t teaching much about rehab. Rehab was considered implementing rest, range of motion, and walks,” she said. “Jake inspired me to learn everything I could in the world of physical rehabilitation.”

And that is a lot. Cappucci worked her way to become a certified canine rehabilitation veterinary nurse, a certified canine massage therapist, and a veterinary technician specialist in physical rehabilitation, along



FROM PET TO PATIENT

Cappucci with her “soul dog,” Jake. Jake inspired Cappucci to become an advocate for the role of physical rehabilitation in veterinary medicine when he was diagnosed with hip dysplasia.

with studying traditional Chinese veterinary medicine. But Cappucci still brings her performer’s spirit to the job, along with her knowledge and training.

“Deana has an infectious positivity and willingness to go above and beyond for her patients. I remember her staying late just to show an owner how to perform home exercises for her dog,” said Leilani Alvarez, DVM, DACVSMR, who worked with Cappucci at the The Schwarzman Animal Medical Center in New York City. “She will do anything to help her patients recover.”

Cappucci aims to give back to other veterinary nurses by sharing the benefits of physical rehabilitation and training others. She serves as the continuing education chair of the Academy of Physical Rehabilitation Veterinary Technicians (APRVT).

We spoke with Cappucci about her journey and why she still gets stage fright to this day (and how she overcomes it).



Every day, veterinary nurses/technicians make a positive impact on their clients, patients, coworkers, and greater community. But the stories behind each and every one of these

professionals are often overlooked due to the selfless nature of working in veterinary medicine.

Today's Veterinary Nurse aims to shine a light on some of these stories with its Clinic Champions series. Each issue, TVN and Midmark will honor a veterinary nurse for their contributions in community service, scholarship, advocacy, or innovation. This series will highlight unsung heroes who make a lasting impact on their patients and community.

At the end of the year, 1 of the 4 honorees will be recognized as the Clinic Champion of the Year. This individual will receive a trip to VMX 2024 in Orlando, Florida, including registration, hotel, and airfare, or a prize of comparable value.

→ To nominate a veterinary nurse/technician, visit bit.ly/ClinicChampions.



TODAY'S VETERINARY NURSE: How different was it for you to be learning concepts and applying them when you have your own pet going through issues that require rehabilitation? How did that affect your educational journey?

DEANA CAPPUCCI: I did not know what rehab entailed when Jake was diagnosed with hip dysplasia. I was introduced to rehab through my externship and was surprised that I didn't learn much about it in my vet tech program. Something we're trying to change through the APRVT in the future is that we want to integrate physical rehabilitation into the coursework for vet tech programs. It's not considered a core course, but we would like to create an elective course option so students have the opportunity to learn more about physical rehabilitation should they be interested.

When I did my externship at the Animal Medical Center in Manhattan, there was a small space with an underwater treadmill. I saw the rehab tech working on patients and I thought it was the coolest thing. It inspired me to ask my surgeon: "What else can I do with Jake besides surgery?" And they suggested trying rehab. I was like, "Well, what does that entail?" So instead of taking Jake to a rehab facility for treatment, I decided to attend the Canine Rehabilitation Institute.

READY FOR REHAB

Cappucci, shown providing laser therapy to Jake (left), stresses the importance of addressing fearful behaviors and pain in rehabilitation patients.

I enjoyed emergency and critical care medicine, but I didn't feel that was the path I wanted for my career moving forward. I remember one of the rehabilitation instructors telling me I looked like a deer in

headlights in that class because I was overwhelmed with all the information I didn't know existed. That's why I'm inspired to help others now because I came from a deer in headlights to advancing myself to a teacher's assistant in that course. I've come full circle!

I love the opportunity to give back because I know what it's like to be sitting on that other side. If it wasn't for Jake, who's not only my soul dog but a patient himself, I don't know which direction in veterinary medicine I would have pursued. However, we all have patients that inspire us, so I hope there would have been a patient to inspire me because even today, I have patients where I'm like, "I want to learn more because of them." Our patients always teach us to be better.

TVN: You spoke about taking a leadership role in education as you developed in your career. Why is this important to you?

CAPPUCCI: It's important to me because education brings value to everyone. I always say that knowledge is meant to be shared. When I started in the veterinary profession, I didn't have all this knowledge and information about what else we could do to help patients. The more education we have, the more we can help our patients. That's ultimately what we're here to do in the veterinary profession: be advocates for our patients. I believe that the more I know, the more I share, so we all benefit.

I love to teach and educate, and that's how I can give back. I was inspired by all the veterinary nurses who taught me and continue to teach me to this day. I joke with them, saying, "Remember when I was a little vet tech with so much to learn—look at me now!" They taught me to be the veterinary nurse I am today, and I am grateful for the opportunity to give back to others.

I've been very fortunate to work at the Animal Medical Center under one of my mentors, Dr. Leilani Alvarez, as she inspired me to be a teacher. She enjoys teaching, and she saw the teacher in me. She also recognized my passion not just for teaching but for learning. Dr. Alvarez is a leader in physical rehabilitation and has

provided exceptional mentorship to the veterinary community. She inspired me to pursue my training as a VTS. When I relocated to Florida, I had the opportunity to work alongside another fantastic leader in the field, Dr. Carolina Medina at Coral Springs Animal Hospital. As a specialist herself, she too inspired me to advance my knowledge in the field and continue teaching. I am also grateful for her guidance.

TVN: How did you develop your confidence when you were starting to work in teaching?

CAPPUCCI: Well, I'll tell you that I did not have much confidence at first, primarily lecturing to a room full of people! It took a lot of encouragement from my mentors. I'll never forget when I was honored to provide a co-lecture with one of my mentors. She's been lecturing for many years, so she's completely natural. However, I was extremely nervous, and I found myself practically heaving from nausea prior to our lecture. She calmed me down, saying, "Don't worry, you'll be fine. It's like dancing, right? You're a little nervous and get stage fright before you go on, but as



I still get nervous and sometimes lack confidence, but then I remember we are all human and no one is perfect. That's part of growth: the more you do, the more confident you become.

soon as you hit the stage, you'll be great." And she was exactly right.

I'm a performer—I grew up on the stage! However, I couldn't help that nervous feeling. It's the excitement and anticipation. As a dancer, I want to perform well, so I start feeling unwell, but as soon as I step foot on stage, the curtain opens, the light comes on, and the right feeling comes over. So with lecturing, the words flow like dance moves.

I still get nervous and sometimes lack confidence, but then I remember we are all human and no one is perfect. That's part of growth: the more you do, the more confident you become. I started by teaching hands-on with students, then writing articles and book chapters, then recording webinars, which built me up to lecturing for students and referring veterinary nurses, and finally lecturing at a conference.

My advice for new speakers or teachers is to do whatever makes you feel calm before your moment. I take a deep breath and think about my dancing spotlight. Ultimately, what helps me overcome my fears or nervousness is that I know I'm there to help others. It's OK if I stumble over my words because I am not perfect. I'm there to give the information, and my passion drives me to continue what I'm doing. That's how I get through.

TVN: How do you view your role as a veterinary professional in advocating for patients when it comes to pain recognition and management?

CAPPUCCI: Recognition of pain management has advanced so much in recent years, and I love how we look at pain as a vital sign in the profession. We are advocates for our patients by identifying pain. In rehab, pain management is one of the first things we're





CLINIC CHAMPIONS



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addressing. We still need more education regarding physical rehabilitation and what we do as rehab professionals because sometimes we still experience surgeons saying, “No rehab. Start with restricted activity.” However, they may not recognize that controlling pain is our priority within rehab and initial recovery. If we control pain, we can help patients feel comfortable with mobility and help to restore function. That’s what rehab is all about, returning the animal to optimal function. We know pain inhibits function, so if we address pain from the start of the first session or early recovery, we hope to prepare the animal for success. I take pride in educating our clients and referring veterinarians in all the services we provide in physical rehabilitation because they might not fully understand our role and what we do.

I’m also grateful that the Fear Free movement is expanding within the profession because I’ve noticed a significant difference in how we practice and our approach to patient care. The rehab space can be a bit scary for a fearful pet. We use lasers, the underwater treadmill, and exercise equipment, all of which can be challenging for a pet experiencing fear, anxiety, or stress. Rehab practitioners can often identify a fear, anxiety, or stress response immediately and try to create a pleasant, positive environment. Ultimately, we want our patients to improve their comfort and mobility, which limits our success if they don’t trust us. Utilizing Fear Free techniques in the rehab space has made experiences much more rewarding for our patients, so they enjoy returning to our office. Being a Fear Free advocate is another passion I continue pursuing, and it’s been a rewarding journey. — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**



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