



CLINIC CHAMPION:

Tammy Wynn, MHA, LISW, RVT, CHPT

Angel's Paws, Cincinnati, Ohio

Tammy Wynn, RVT, had it all figured out. Wynn, a therapist by trade who held 2 master's degrees and a burgeoning consulting business, stayed busy hosting a hit business show on the local Cincinnati airwaves and using her pilot's license to fly her airplane to New York City and back for meetings. But that's when Wynn's life was rocked—and she began to see the outline of the path that would lead to her ultimate purpose.

Her 18-year-old cat, Cagney, dipped into failing health. Without children of her own, Wynn regarded her cats as her kids and found her attention drifting from work and toward her ailing pet. As she worked through the grief that came with this experience, she was met with a surprisingly “abrasive” approach from her veterinarian and a lack of tools to help her through the experience.

“Ultimately, Cagney passed, and it brought me to my knees,” said Wynn. “I experienced a level of pain that I just couldn’t fathom and I’ve been a therapist for years. The emotional pain that I reached with that was just shocking and devastating. I looked around Cincinnati at the time—and this was in 2003—for a support group or somebody to help me, but there were no resources available.”

When Wynn’s father was diagnosed with bladder cancer a year later, she found a much different experience in human hospice. Wynn and her family felt the emotional support and positive benefits of working through the grief and treasuring their last days with her father. As Wynn was driving to pick up her dad’s ashes, she experienced a pivotal moment in her life.

“I was a new believer [in God] at the time, and on April 6 at 3:30 in the afternoon, I was driving and 2 words were put in my heart: animal hospice. I promise you,” said Wynn, “it was not something that went through my brain, but into my heart.”

Wynn went to Google and found nothing on the concept at that point in the early 2000s. She decided to go all in.

“I ended my big career, shut down all of my clients, and took the next 6 years to work toward this goal,” said Wynn.



LASTING COMFORT

Angel’s Paws provides In-house private cremation so the pet never leaves their care. The family is reunited with their pet’s ashes in one of Angel’s Paws’ 2 chapels.

A multiphase journey ensued. Wynn went to work in a human hospice for 3.5 years before identifying the final piece that would prepare her for this pursuit: becoming a registered veterinary technician (RVT). She returned to school at age 50 and earned her RVT certification.

“Going through the vet tech program was so important for me. I needed to understand the disease process of the pets if I was really going to do my vision justice. I had to retake those biology and chemistry courses that I dreaded as an undergrad, and I aced every single class!” Wynn said. “Because I knew what I was going to be doing with it this time.”

In 2010, Wynn founded Angel’s Paws, a mobile veterinary medical organization that provides end-of-life services ranging from hospice care to at-home euthanasia. In the past 13 years, Angel’s Paws has helped more than 25 000 pets and their families, building a collaborative network of 100-plus veterinary



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.

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



hospitals in the area. Wynn has more than 20 employees today, including 12 RVTs who help shape the empathetic ethos for Angel's Paws.

"Tammy meets every person and situation with understanding and compassion. Through her kindness and positivity, she creates a loving and healthy work environment, which is so needed in our field right now with so many mental and physical health obstacles that are becoming more problematic in our profession," said Kimberly Buchanan, RVT, a hospice team member at Angel's Paws. "When you work with Tammy you learn how to navigate tough emotional situations, as well as everyday life, in a way that benefits everyone."

Wynn, a trailblazer in shining a light on end-of-life care for companion animals, is a past president of the International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care (IAAHPC), the sole veterinary technician on the AAHA/IAAHPC End-of-Life Care task force, and a National Association of Social Workers Pioneer.

We had the chance to speak with Wynn about her vision for end-of-life care, advice for aspiring entrepreneurs, and more.

TODAY'S VETERINARY NURSE: You spoke about how human hospice treats the whole family support system as an extension of the patient. What is your approach to bringing this concept to veterinary medicine?

TAMMY WYNN: First of all, we of course identify the patient as the pet, and the entire family is called the unit of care. When we enroll a pet into our hospice, we take a history about what has happened with the pet medically, as it's been done traditionally. But we then go the extra step and find out about the family: What has been their experience with end-of-life situations in the past? Have they experienced euthanasia before? Is this something that they're very worried about because they had a traumatic euthanasia in their past? Are they interested in a natural passing? This way, we can structure a program around what the client wants. That is what's so different. We go in and we try to learn about their goals and what they want to accomplish. Then, we try to match our program up as well as we possibly can to that.

The biggest difference is that we're very client centered and

give the client a voice, but we also give the pet a voice. We do a lot of teaching with the families because they don't know exactly what they're looking at with their pet. Oftentimes, when a pet is in a clinic being assessed at end of life, they're not behaving exactly the same as they are at home. When we go out to the home, we take some time, allow the pet to be able to maneuver around in their own environment, and we're able to give safety tips. We suggest that they put baby gates up next to a set of stairs that the pet has gone by many times when they had sight but may be a hazard now or we recommend setting out runners or yoga mats on hard floors so the pet can keep traction and avoid splaying. Independence for a pet is what is so incredibly important.

TVN: What was the most challenging moment of doubt as you transitioned from your comfortable career into this new venture?

WYNN: In year 3 of building Angel's Paws as a company, which was like pushing a boulder straight up a hill, I was diagnosed with stage III metastatic breast cancer. I went through all of the therapies: chemo, surgery, radiation. But this was such an important



IN-HOME CARE
Wynn performs a quality-of-life visit with a pet and family enrolled in Angel's Paws' in-home hospice program.

experience for me, and I somehow knew it was supposed to be in my path. I was the picture of health before this, but I learned some really important lessons. I had always been the one taking care of the sick pet, the pet that was getting ready to pass. I knew how devastating and difficult that was. But once I was the “sick pet,” I saw my husband caregiving for me and I realized, no matter how bad it got, it was always worse for him, because he was watching me powerless and couldn’t make things better for me. He had to wait on the medicine to start working and just had to be there to support me in the process. Some people might say that this was my lowest moment, but it really was an important part of my journey.

TVN: How do you handle emotional fatigue for you and your staff?

WYNN: I call myself a self-care fraud because I talk about self care to everybody else. I talk about it to my staff and I talk about it to my clients. I’m a really good talker. But when it comes to me, I’m like every other caregiver, because if there’s anybody in front of me who needs something, they’re going to get my attention and my energy, and I am going to neglect myself. However, as I’ve mentioned, I’ve had cancer in the past. And now I’m reaching the ripe old age of 64. I’m recognizing that if I don’t do what I always say, I’m not going to be around to help my staff and I’m not going to be around to help my clients.

I have taken a huge step toward self care. I’m actually doing groups for self care within our staff. We call them “tune-ups” and we do them once a quarter. These are more or less group therapy sessions where we talk through the recent highs and lows. It gives us an opportunity to stop and deal with these issues emotionally. Not just mentally, because as we’re going through those things we’re logging them mentally, but they’re actually building up on us emotionally as well. We provide that outlet so that we can safely get those things out and talk about them. It’s very important to have some humor that comes from there because laughter truly is the best medicine. They’re not all somber; these tune-ups are very invigorating.

TVN: From an entrepreneurial perspective, what were some things that surprised you about the animal healthcare space?

WYNN: From a business perspective—and I’m coming at it as an outsider—one of the reasons why our service is so well received in this area by pet parents is because it was born from a pet parent’s heart. Everything we



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deliver, the way we deliver it in their home, didn’t come from the veterinary community. I started with this way too late in life to bring a “this is the way we’ve always done it” perspective. So, I was able to come at it fresh with my whole service. The same is true for how I run my business. Because in the veterinary space, especially these days, there’s a lot of consolidation. But we are very “mom and pop” in our approach. And that’s a mindful decision on our part.

My husband is a licensed clinical counselor and I’m a licensed independent social worker. We’re both therapists and that’s who’s leading our organization. From a business perspective, my approach is that quality is always of the utmost importance. That’s what we focus on. We don’t focus on the dollars. I know that sounds crazy to a business person, but I truly have that belief. We have proven it over 13 years that if we focus on delivering an amazing, knock-your-socks-off quality service to our clients, we do not have to worry about the money. That includes how we prioritize our staff. We are always trying to come up with benefits and added value for our team, and those things cost money. But we do it because we know if we take the most amazing care of our staff, our staff is going to take the most amazing care of our patients and clients. And so that’s what keeps our business running.

TVN: How does your role as an RVT shape how you approach your business?

WYNN: Knowing the important role the nurse plays in human hospice fuels me. In the veterinary world, mobile vets are able to go out to the homes. However, the veterinary nurses get overlooked as far as being involved outside of the clinic. The veterinary nurses bring very special skills when they go out to the home; they’re able to interact and connect with a family on a whole different level that the family can feel very



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comfortable with. Sometimes, people are a little intimidated talking to the doctor, but they can let their hair down and speak about what's really going on with the pet to the veterinary nurse. So, my drive is always to help veterinary nurses use the full complement of their training. We want them to bring their brain to work and bring us their ideas and really assess these families and share the information that they're gleaning because it's a different perspective. That's why an interdisciplinary team for hospice is so important: While it's essential to have that veterinarian role, it's also very important to have the veterinary nurse role and social work role. All of those work together.

I want veterinary nurses to know that they can be leaders of an organization, they can in some states own a business like this, and they can use all of their skills. I have a personal bias because I saw the hard work that I went through in that tiny little classroom where I had people right there next to me, and I saw the hard work they did. A lot of times they get out and they're not making much money, but even worse than that they are not asked to use their skills. So, pushing that through my business has been a very big motivator for me.

TVN: Do you have any advice for any veterinary nurses who want to pursue entrepreneurship?

WYNN: I am a believer in people fulfilling their full potential. I am a therapist and what we're all about is that we get 1 little shot at this life. Don't have any regrets; do what you feel you are called in your heart to do. If you feel like this is something that you want to pursue, and that you could do well, then prepare yourself and seek the education that you need. The veterinary nurse/technician program is an amazing place to prepare you clinically, but being a business owner is an entirely different skill set. So, seek some business training as well. I think that 80% of businesses, whether you're in the veterinary space or not, fail within the first 5 years. And the reason is because somebody's a very good technical person—they're good with animals, they're good at baking cookies, whatever it may be—but the business skills are entirely different. So, balance out both. Not to say that you have to just focus on the money because, as I said earlier, that's not what this is all about. But business is tricky, and there are things that you really do need to know about in order to navigate those choppy waters. I would love to see more of these intelligent people who I've surrounded myself with be all they can be. If it's in your heart that you're also going to be a business owner, do it! — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**



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