



CLINIC CHAMPION:

Don Montes, LVT

AmbuVet, New York, New York

Don Montes, LVT, knows that some client complaints can lead to the best ideas. He was working in a small private practice in Manhattan near the turn of the century when an older client who struggled to get her Rottweiler down the clinic's steps asked an inspirational question: "How come there isn't a pet ambulance?"

Courtesy James Franco



READY FOR THE CALL

Montes relies on his nursing skills as an LVT to adapt when the unexpected arises and provides the proper care for patients during transfer to a veterinary facility.

Montes thought about that question and decided he would be the one to do something about it in his hometown. He started the very early iteration of AmbuVet in September of 2001, when the World Trade Center attacks shook the world and subsequently changed the course of his career.

“I was branded by fire when 9/11 happened—I thought, ‘OK, what is it I can do to contribute here?’ They had all these rescue dogs coming in from Europe, from Canada, from all over the world, because at that point it was a rescue mission. I came down with an empty van, I’m talking about a truck that was without

any equipment, nothing. I hadn’t even really started AmbuVet. But I tried my best. I went to all the different animal hospitals that I knew about in the city and I got fluids, food, bandages, whatever I could contribute. When I got to the first checkpoint at Ground Zero, they started waving me through because they saw ‘pet ambulance’ on the side of my van, which at that time was just a magnet.

“There were 2 veterinarians there with 1 table, including 1 vet who I knew. She was like, ‘Don, nobody’s here, FEMA hasn’t shown up. All these rescue dogs are here. They’re on the pile for 16 hours. We don’t have anybody to help us.’ I stayed there for 10 days and I never looked back. And I was like, if this isn’t a sign from God for me to keep doing what I’m trying to do here, I don’t know what else could be.”

Today, Montes is still all in on helping the pets of the greater New York City area. He founded the pet ambulance service AmbuVet 22 years ago and today has 3 vans, 2 other full-time employees, and plenty of medical equipment in each van to safely transport animals wherever they need to go. That includes oxygen support equipment, crates, stretchers, pulse oximeters, bandages, and other equipment that could be useful. Montes and his AmbuVet team take shifts responding to calls that come through on a 24-hour line. When jobs call for an extra set of hands—like helping a 130-lb German shepherd down 5 flights of stairs, as Montes had recently finished doing—they have a roster of per diem workers who can lend a hand in a pinch. While Montes says patients needing oxygen assistance and those needing to be transported on a stretcher because of mobility issues are his most common calls, he has basically seen it all over the years. And “no” is not a word that comes up often for Montes and his team.



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* 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.

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

“When some people start on the job, the first couple of months they really like it. And then after, like, maybe month 4, they think, *I have to get up at 3 o’clock in the morning to go to the South Bronx for an aggressive pit bull? I don’t know if I want to do that right now,*” said Montes with an understanding laugh. “That’s the thing: I’ll always be ready for stuff like that.”

Being on call 24/7 in one of the country’s most densely populated cities is not easy, and Montes is not shy about the difficulties that come with his job.

“People oftentimes think that we’re rolling around with puppies and kittens, and you know, just having a good time. And that’s not the case,” said Montes. “Burnout is a big thing with what it is that we do here.”

But Montes believes he’s found his calling in helping the people and pets of New York City that need that extra bit of assistance. After more than 2 decades of seeing 4 to 5 calls a day—including long stretches without days off—Montes has seen the wear and tear on his body. But he’s not so eager to hang up his Ford E-350 keys and leave the buzzing streets full time for a more managerial role.

“Then you would be putting me within the 4 walls of an office,” said Montes. “I’m not that guy. I’m a road dog!”

We spoke with Montes about the ins and outs of working in New York City, the various cases he’s seen, and how he deals with such a demanding role.

EN ROUTE
Sebastian Montes (right) helps a patient in 1 of 3 AmbuVet vehicles (below), which are all equipped for emergency transfer.

TODAY’S VETERINARY NURSE: What does a day in the life look like for you?

DON MONTES: There’s never the same day twice—never, never, never. My day starts early in the morning when we start getting more calls. I’ll give you my last one as an example: There was a 130-lb German shepherd that lived up 5 flights of steps. He had a lot of swelling in his joints and is owned by an older couple, so we had to help get him downstairs. The one before that, we had a cat that was a congestive heart failure patient at the general practice but needed to go to a 24-hour emergency specialist. Oh, by the way, the cat is open-mouth breathing, is oxygen-dependent, and needs to stay on oxygen going over to this specialty facility. This is a typical example we will see where we need to transfer the patient with our mobile oxygen chamber. But we also do deceased animals, we do aggressive animals. We had a case last week where a 120-lb





Japanese Akita who was a shop dog stepped on one of the machine parts and cut open its paw. The dog is aggressive, so the owners of the shop didn't want to get anywhere close to the dog. We had to bring out our mobile carrier and a rabies pole to get him in there. So, again, it's never the same day twice. We did a special operation once where we had 13 cats, 3 of which were diabetic, that needed to move from Long Island to St. Louis, Missouri. And the lady didn't want the cats to go in an airplane. We said, "OK, no problem." So, we were in the middle of Cincinnati, you know, dip sticking the urine and everything to make sure they were OK as we transferred them halfway across the country. It's never the same day twice, but it's always high energy.

The people who call us are dealing with members of their family, their pets. So, they are dealing with emotions and distress. I've had people hysterically crying, I've had people hysterically laughing, I've had people who are aggressive, I've seen emotions running all over the place. This is definitely not your typical LVT shift because we're always on the road.

We also work a lot with the ASPCA; this is one of the more challenging case types we see. We worked with them when Hurricane Sandy hit, and we work a lot with them with their NYPD (New York Police Department) forensics, so we see a lot of cruelty cases. Those always are terrible, because I don't understand how any person can bring themselves to do this to

another organism. You know what I'm saying? It's terrible. But your compassion always has to be there. Because, you know, once my compassion leaves, then I have to find something else to do. I love what I do. I wouldn't change it for the world.

TVN: How have you found balance in your life working in a 24/7 service?

MONTES: It's not easy for me. I go home with a heavy heart whenever it is that I deal with animal cruelty cases. I'm fortunate in that I have a very supportive family. I have a wife and a son, who's now 21. He's an adult, and he's out of the house now, but they always understood my passion, my drive. They always understood my mission: If there is an emergency and nobody else is going to help them, I'm gonna go do it. I've been pulled out of dinners, movies, vacations—you name it. I dedicated my life to this, it's what I'm here for. I've been fortunate enough to be blessed with a family that has been supportive.

TVN: What are the cases that validate all the hard work you do and make you feel like you're doing the right thing?

MONTES: My callbacks. When I get a callback and they say: "They treated her and she's home now. We wouldn't have been able to do it without you." If you look at our Google reviews, we're at like a 4.9 because people are really appreciative of the stuff that we try to do here. Veterinary medicine is not white and black; there's shades of gray. You have to be creative and every case is different. You're always having to be very creative in terms of your approach with the animals as well as with the people.

TVN: What is it like working in New York City? What are some of the logistical challenges that come with being in such a dense city?

MONTES: New York City is one of those areas, man. Everybody thinks New York City is a huge place. It's really not. The Bronx is the only borough physically attached to the rest of the country. Brooklyn and Queens are part of Long Island. Manhattan and Staten Island are their own islands. So, we have a lot of bridges, a lot of water, a lot of tunnels. And since it is a small geographical area, everybody lives on top of each other, sometimes in high-rises. Working here, we see more of the animals that are stuck in buildings that may not have a working elevator.

Another big difference working in New York City: Traffic is its own animal here. Traffic is a big thing. We

have our sirens and we have our lights, but we don't use them unless we have an emergency. And even when we do have an emergency, it's not like they're moving for us, you know what I mean? That's always a bit challenging, rush hour is a serious thing. If I'm trying to get to Long Island on a Saturday afternoon, a 20-minute ride is going to take me about an hour and 15 minutes, for example. We have to prep for those extra times in a city like ours. Also, we just see so many different cases here. I'll be in a hoarder's house and then get a call for a \$6 million luxury Park Avenue triplex apartment.

There's a lot of people around, we're small and tall in New York City. There's about 8 million people that physically live in the city and 20 million people that fluctuate in and out on a regular basis. We also have a lot of tolls here. Our tolls here in New York account for 1/5 of the whole country, I'm talking about from Alaska all the way over. So, it's not unusual for, let's say, my total bill (for all 3 AmbuVet vehicles) to be close to \$1000 per month. But other than that, it's one of the greatest cities in the world. I was born and raised in Queens, New York, right here. There's no other place like it, the city that never sleeps. — *By Andy Zunz TVN*

LIFELONG CALLING

Montes, shown with a patient, knows the ins and outs of emergency transfer in New York City after 22 years on the job.



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