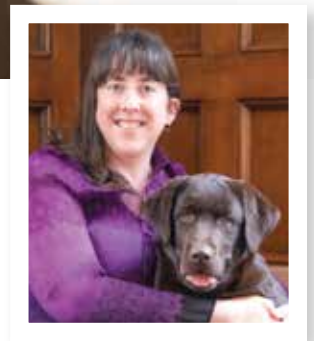




SUPPORT SYSTEM Rune, shown at the Allegheny County Magisterial District Court, accompanies Cheri Herschell to court twice a week as part of a program assisting survivors of domestic violence.



CLINIC CHAMPION:

Cheri Herschell, CVT

Crisis Center North, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article discusses domestic violence. If you or someone you know are experiencing domestic violence, help is available via the National Domestic Violence Hotline thehotline.org.

Nearly 8 years ago, Cheri Herschell, CVT, made the decision to leave. As a survivor of domestic violence, Herschell was unexpectedly thrust into the position of being a single mother and, with the need for a 9-to-5 schedule, leaving her career in the clinic as a veterinary technician behind.



“I had no idea it was coming,” Herschell said. “But it had to happen.”

The change left her facing the legal system without any prior experience or support.

“I had no idea what I was supposed to do when I arrived at the courtroom. I didn’t know anything that had happened until the judgment was made,” said Herschell. “Every victim has rights, and one of those rights is to have a say in what happens in the court system. I didn’t have that say because I didn’t have an advocate there to tell me that I had that available.”

Today, Herschell is the advocate she never had. She works as a domestic violence advocate for Crisis Center North in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, acting as a guide for victims as they attend hearings in magistrate court—with the help of a very special assistant. As part of the center’s Paws for Empowerment Animal Advocacy Program, Herschell brings her chocolate Labrador retriever, Rune, along as a therapy dog for survivors of intimate partner violence.

“Now when I go to court, I make sure the victims understand all of their options and everything that’s available to them,” she said.

Herschell also uses her personal experiences and expertise as a certified veterinary technician to bring awareness to an overlooked issue: the link between animal abuse and domestic abuse, and the role veterinary professionals can play in preventing both. When she’s not at magistrate court on Mondays and Tuesdays, attending anywhere from 1 to 5 hearings per day, Herschell is reaching out to local clinics and veterinary technician programs with the goal of training veterinary professionals how to identify signs of abuse and providing tools for offering help.

The Link Between Animal and Domestic Abuse

- Among women who owned a pet while in an abusive relationship, 89% reported that their abuser mistreated their animal.¹
- In the same study, 56% of the respondents delayed leaving their abuser out of fear for their pet’s safety.¹
- In another study, women in domestic violence shelters were nearly 11 times more likely to report that their abuser harmed or killed their pets than women who had not experienced intimate violence.²
- In a study of children who had been exposed to intimate partner violence, 50% reported that the abuser threatened to harm their pet to maintain control over their victims.³

¹Barrett BJ, Fitzgerald A, Stevenson R, Cheung CH. Animal maltreatment as a risk marker of more frequent and severe forms of intimate partner violence. *J Interpers Violence*. 2020;35(23-24):5131-5156. doi:10.1177/0886260517719542

²Ascione FR, Weber CV, Thompson TM, Heath J, Maruyama M, Hayashi K. Battered pets and domestic violence: animal abuse reported by women experiencing intimate violence and by nonabused women. *Violence Against Women*. 2007;13(4):354-373. doi:10.1177/1077801207299201

³McDonald SE, Collins EA, Nicotera N, et al. Children’s experiences of companion animal maltreatment in households characterized by intimate partner violence. *Child Abuse Negl*. 2015;50:116-127. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.10.005

She acknowledges that among shifting demands from clients, staff shortages, and numerous other challenges, it can be difficult for veterinary professionals to add another training to their list. However, statistics say this is an issue that will make its way to veterinary professionals, ready or not.



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.



“Veterinarians are listed as 1 of the top 3 professions that a domestic violence victim is likely to disclose their situation to,” said Herschell. “So, it’s vitally important for them to be aware that they may very well have somebody come into their clinic and admit that their animal or they themselves are being abused. Having a simple brochure or a card that veterinarians can hand clients and say, ‘Hey, these people are here for you 24/7,’ is all we’re asking.”

We spoke with Herschell about her work with Rune in court and the importance of shining a light on the link between animal and domestic abuse.

TODAY’S VETERINARY NURSE: How does the Paws for Empowerment program work? What does a day in court look like for you and Rune?

CHERI HERSCHELL: Rune and I get up in the morning and I spruce her up because she’s a Labrador, so she obviously enjoys doing Labrador things on her off days. I always get her clean and fresh, and we put on her working vest and load up to head to the magistrate court. When we first go in, I talk to the assistant district attorney who has all the cases for the day. They will indicate to me which cases are domestic violence cases, and at that point I’ll take notes because it’s really uncomfortable for victims to have to reiterate their story over and over. I utilize the police report to understand what happened in the situation, and then we go find the victim and take them to a private area with Rune to tell me anything they want to talk about—I’m there to listen to them.

We educate them on how the court system works, what the day is going to look like, what might happen, whether or not there may be a hearing. At that point, we make sure that they understand all the services that are available to them, both through Crisis Center North and other agencies in the area. If they have to go into a hearing, typically the victims like to have Rune accompany them while they have to sit in the courtroom and talk about what happened to them. She’ll typically sit with the victim and I’ll sit in a chair nearby while the hearing is going on.

TVN: What are some of the benefits you’ve seen by bringing Rune to court with you?

HERSCHELL: Rune’s job is simply to be herself. Her favorite thing is to sit with her head in their lap, and I’ve seen a lot of victims relax; they’re much more comfortable when the dog is there, especially in a hearing situation. They feel more confident to tell their

story. I don’t know if it’s simply because the dog is there and she’s between them—the victim and the perpetrator, who’s in the same room. We’ve had people tell us that even though they knew that Rune was not going to do anything, they just felt more comfortable because she was in between them. It gives them something to do—a lot of times they get nervous and start fidgeting and jostling. Having a dog there is almost like a fidget item or something that they can touch. And as animal advocates, we know that dogs and all animals are able to release the feel-good hormones in our body; they lower our blood pressure, and they innately reduce stress even in very stressful situations. We see clients that are overall more comfortable and tell us on our surveys that they’re much more willing to attend court if they know that a dog is going to be there to help them.

It takes a special dog to do this kind of work. There are dogs that love *one* person and there are dogs that love *everybody*. Dogs that work in these situations truly have to love everybody because they’ll be serving several clients throughout the day. And they’re not picky. I have had Rune insist on going in and visiting the perpetrators or anybody who was jailed and are brought to the magistrate court. I’ve actually had her insist on going in and visiting them if she senses that one of them is having a particularly hard time. Typically, as long as we don’t have someone who’s waiting for us, I’ll allow her to do that just because we’re there to help.

We also have another dog, Ari, who is owned by the executive director of our center. He goes to court too, but he’s a real gem in counseling. He goes to counseling with both our adult and our child counselor, and they have seen remarkable differences in their clients when the dog is there. These dogs are making a huge difference in clients being able to not only tell their story but to have the confidence to move forward.

TVN: Why is this an important topic for veterinary professionals to learn about?

HERSCHELL: I’ve found through doing this for the past few years that veterinarians are overwhelmingly uneducated about how to recognize pet neglect and abuse. It’s not anybody’s fault and it’s not that they don’t want to recognize it, but they don’t have the training. If you can recognize pet abuse, statistics tell us that it is almost guaranteed that you are recognizing human abuse as well. In up to 90% of homes in the U.S. where there is human abuse going on, there is also pet abuse going on. There’s a very strong correlation.



TVN: How can veterinary professionals increase their awareness and make a difference?

HERSCHELL: It took many years for the human medical system to adopt a program of screening and then helping victims find the help that they needed. That's why in a lot of doctor's offices, especially women will often be asked the question, "Do you feel safe at home?" Ultimately, our goal is that veterinarians are in some way communicating that same message to their clients. "Are you and your pet safe in your home? And if not, we have resources available to get you the help that you need." But for right now, we're promoting a passive response, which allows veterinarians to have the resources available to domestic violence organizations in their area, so that if their clients need it, they have access to it. When I do presentations in clinics, I bring a brochure that talks about the services that our particular crisis center can offer victims of domestic violence who have pets. We also ask that they put small business cards that have all of the contact information for the center as well as some safety tips in their restroom so that if somebody is in danger, they can take one of those discreetly and hide them. We've also had veterinarians who have started putting our cards in brochures and their new pet packets. That's really helpful as well because you're not accusing anybody of being a victim or a perpetrator, but you're passively passing along that information. And it's good for the veterinarians as well, because it's spreading a message that they care about the client and their pets.

TVN: How can veterinary nurses/technicians step up and play a role in addressing this issue?

HERSCHELL: It's hard to do. When I started working in veterinary medicine back in the early 2000s, we didn't have the protections that we have now. If we instigated an investigation for animal neglect or abuse, and it wasn't followed up on by law enforcement, we could be civilly sued either individually or as a practice by that pet owner. Now, that is no longer the case. In Pennsylvania, and in most states across the United States, there are protections for veterinary professionals who report, and they are protected from civil lawsuit both personally and as a practice for reporting suspected neglect or abuse. There are also 19 states in the United States right now that mandate veterinarians to report suspected neglect or abuse. I have found that very few veterinarians are aware of that.

Screening is hard, because you have to know how to ask difficult questions. That can be very uncomfortable. I found my communication with victims to be much

Resources

- Animal Cruelty Reporting and Immunity Laws by State
animallaw.info/topic/table-veterinary-reporting-requirement-and-immunity-laws
- National Link Coalition Resources
nationallinkcoalition.org/resources
- RedRover: The Signs of an Abusive Relationship Involving Pets
redrover.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/89087-PLP-Vet-US-Poster.pdf
- AVMA: When Domestic Violence Arrives at the Clinic Door
avma.org/javma-news/2018-09-15/when-domestic-violence-arrives-clinic-door

easier because I was somebody who was in that situation. I've been there and done that. It's not uncomfortable for me at all to share my story with people, and it helps other victims open up about theirs. But it's very difficult to dig deeper when a client may tell you, "Oh, my dog got hit by a car." But you're not seeing any of the typical signs of a dog being hit by a car. You're not seeing torn toenails or road rash; you're only seeing internal injuries. Those are the really difficult questions. My presentations are designed to help veterinarians learn how to approach those. Because ultimately, as a domestic violence organization, we're here to support human victims of domestic violence.

TVN: How does your training and experience as a veterinary technician help you in this role?

HERSCHELL: I'm not sure that anybody who hasn't worked in veterinary medicine in some aspect would be able to connect with veterinarians in the same way. We're a special breed, especially us vet techs. There's just a very unique skill set among us. There's a sense of organization in the chaos that we always seem to manage. This helps me go in there and tell veterinary professionals, "Hey, I've been here. I know exactly what you're going through. I know how hard it is. I know that screening people and their pets for domestic violence isn't something that's on your radar right now. But here's a super easy way to let clients know that you care about not only their pets, but that you care about them too." — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**