



CLINIC CHAMPION:

Amber LaRock, LVT

Chiang Mai, Thailand



EDITOR'S NOTE: This article discusses substance abuse. If you or someone you know is experiencing substance abuse, help is available via the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at [findtreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov).

Shortly before graduating and entering the workforce full-time, Amber LaRock, LVT, saw an ad for what would ultimately be a life-changing experience: a veterinary volunteer trip to Chiang Mai, Thailand. The trip was a big success, and LaRock caught the travel bug. Back in the States, she worked extensive hours at an emergency hospital for the chance to carve out time—and savings—to take more trips abroad.



"I got to the point where I was living for these travel experiences," said LaRock. "I would go have an amazing experience, wish my life could be this all the time, and then go back to start the saving process and do it all over again."

At that point, LaRock made it her mission to find a way to make a living using her veterinary expertise while also living abroad and getting much-needed "animal time." The solution? A career in freelance writing for veterinary-focused platforms and volunteer work at international animal clinics and rescues. While LaRock knew this might lead to an "Oh my god, I don't have a job" moment, she made the change.

"It just had to be a leap of faith. I was really scared, but once I dipped my toes into the online space, I found there's a lot of opportunity online for veterinary professionals, especially if you're licensed and you have clinical experience," she said.

Since 2018, LaRock has been navigating the challenges and joys of her life abroad, spending extended time in Cambodia, Ecuador, and Thailand. She created the Instagram account [@vettechandtravel](#) to chronicle her life and work with local animals abroad. But between posts with the resident cats at a local temple in Chiang Mai and dogs in need of rabies vaccination in Cambodia, LaRock has found her voice as an advocate in the veterinary community. She has made a point to openly discuss her personal experience with substance abuse and journey to sobriety. After experiencing "stigma and shame" as she navigated this process in isolation from her friends and peers, LaRock wanted to help others navigating the same challenges by creating spaces to share and learn.

"It's been a journey, honestly. But I've really grown into how comfortable I am in my sobriety today," she said.



HOUSE CALLS AROUND THE WORLD

Among LaRock's travels include stops in Cambodia (left), where rabies is endemic and vaccination campaigns save lives, and Ecuador (above), where her work in Cotacachi offered some families their first access to veterinary care.

"It took a long time for me to not be ashamed of the little bits and pieces and realize that it's all part of the journey.

"If I'm going through it, someone is probably going through it right now as well, or they're trying to move on from it. There's a lot of us going through this right now. So, if anybody's embarrassed to talk about it, I at least would like them to see it when they're scrolling, and know that someone else is out there. It's going to be OK. Recovery takes work, but it's not life ending."



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.



We spoke with LaRock about her experience living and working with animals around the globe, her journey to recovery, and how her perspective has changed over the years from these experiences.

TODAY'S VETERINARY NURSE: What have you learned from immersing yourself in these cultures and new environments?

AMBER LAROCK: I basically have to land everywhere with an open mind, a clean slate, and realize that I am a guest here. I try to go with the flow, learn the rules, and learn the best ways to approach different situations. I always try to get into an animal clinic or an animal rescue immediately when I get there to volunteer, just so I can get to know people and learn a bit more about the city and culture. Having a set plan or preconceived understanding of a place is not going to help until you actually step foot in that place, see what comes your way, and then adapt. This lifestyle has made me pretty adaptable—you have to be because it's never going to go the exact way that you think it's going to. It's completely new, completely foreign.

Life is just a little different over here, but it's really changed me as a person. Before, everything had to be on my plan or I would freak out. I was very much a planner, and if things didn't go my way, it really threw me off. I had to get rid of that mentality completely, or else I was going to lose my mind. Traveling and living abroad has made me a much more patient and open-minded person as a whole.

GREAT AND SMALL

In Thailand, LaRock works with organizations that provide preventive services in rural villages (left) and uses her platform to highlight ethical elephant sanctuaries (right).

TVN: What have these experiences in different countries taught you about being a veterinary nurse/technician and the human-animal bond?

LAROCK: One of the most impactful lessons that I've

learned while living abroad is that there are so many ways to love an animal and pet ownership means many different things to many different people. And none of them are wrong. When it comes to the western world, a lot of us have a preconceived idea of what it means to love an animal. You have to check all these boxes on a list in order to be a good, responsible pet parent. I learned it's just not the case. Even in America right now, life is really hard. Pet ownership can look really different for different people, and love for a pet looks so different across the board.

For example, last week with Hand to Paw (a non-profit organization in Thailand) we went to the home of a guy who basically became the local village animal rescuer. He loves animals. So, as a result, a lot of people dump animals on him now, and he was overrun. Before he knew it, he had around 30 dogs—he practically had a shelter. He was doing the best that he could, he was fundraising to give them chicken and rice and take them to the vet. But if an outsider from the western world walked in there and saw the situation, it would maybe make them really upset and they would even be



a little judgmental without knowing the back story, the complications that these people face, and the layers of the situation. The reason that we ended up getting in contact with him is he messaged Hand to Paw, not for any money. He just said, “My dogs have fleas, and they’re biting me at night, do you think that you would be able to give me anything for fleas?” He didn’t understand what other options were out there to stop the fleas, the overpopulation, and that disease. Once you actually get into the situation and offer education, not only do these dogs not have fleas and ticks anymore, they’re all sterilized, they’re all vaccinated, they’re being treated for tick disease, and everybody’s so much happier. I’ve seen so many examples; we can’t judge until we know the intimate details. And it’s very rare that these people are doing anything out of cruelty or out of disinterest. I try to apply that mindset now to everything that I encounter, whether it’s something that happens over here, or even when I go back into practice in the United States. It’s important to have an open mind, more compassion for people, and to meet them where they’re at. Compassion for others is going to get you so much further in every situation.

TVN: What’s the most common travel question you get and what’s your best advice for those who are interested?

LAROCK: The most common question is, “How do I even dive into this world?” Because it can be really daunting. I try to remember that very first flight that I stepped onto when I was setting out on my first adventure. I was terrified, I had no idea what was to come or what to compare it to. I always tell people that, especially compared to 5 years ago, there are so many veterinary volunteer agencies that are a lot like veterinary travel agencies in a way. They set you up with these projects or with specific clinics in different parts of the world. They do all the organizing for you where you don’t even have to stress, you just have to show up. Usually these services have a fee, like a travel agent. But it’s a wonderful way to dive into the world of international volunteer work to meet other like-minded professionals, make some really great connections, and potentially open the door to careers as well. Some examples of this that I always recommend are: Mission Rabies, Worldwide Veterinary Services, and Worldwide Vets.

TVN: You have spoken about your journey to sobriety, your experience with substance abuse, and the importance of creating an environment where people feel comfortable sharing their

experiences. How did you decide to take that step toward sobriety?

LAROCK: It’s a long and winding story. I’ve struggled with substance abuse since I was 14 or 15 years old, and I got sober when I was 23. So, I had some time where I was in active addiction and then active alcoholism until I actually got sober. These were issues that I brought with me from my teen years into adulthood. But also, working in a vet practice, we have such a unique combination of stressors that it only makes things worse. That’s how it is for every professional—they’re stepping into work, but they’re also carrying in with them their baggage from childhood, their baggage at home. And we’re working in a field that’s deeply emotional, very stressful, and undersupported at times.

About 2 years into practice, I made the decision to go to rehab. But that was after many years of active alcoholism. It took a lot of time, broken relationships, financial ruin, and legal trouble to where I finally made the decision to get sober. Back then, what was so hard is I didn’t know about a lot of people in the veterinary space that were experiencing the things that I was experiencing. And, if anything, I felt the opposite. There was a lot of stigma at work and little remarks about working with people who struggled with active addiction. A lot of people had been hurt by an addict or an alcoholic and, understandably, that can lead to judgments in the workplace. So, when I first got sober, I really kept it to myself for a long time because I thought that I would be judged, and I felt ashamed. I carried that shame with me for at least a year before I talked openly and comfortably. It took about a year for me to view it as a strength rather than a weakness.

Connect With Amber

Follow Amber LaRock on Instagram and TikTok (@vettechandtravel) for more on her experiences traveling and working in veterinary medicine. LaRock also recently ventured into the world of publishing with her first book, *Heal My Fractious Heart: A Vet Med Romcom*. This “passion project” features characters who are all veterinary professionals and plenty of romance and laughs to go around.



But once I actually did start talking about my journey to sobriety and all the years that I struggled in alcoholism and addiction, I got such a big response from people in the veterinary space. And I was like, “Oh my god, I had no idea that there were so many people out there experiencing the same struggles.” And to this day, every time I share anything about my sobriety, I get so many messages from people that say, “I needed to see this, I felt so alone, I’m experiencing the same thing right now.” I’ve been sober for 8 years now, but I’ve learned that there’s so many of us out there in this space. I read that, as of last year, about 13% to 15% of veterinarians documented have an issue with substance abuse. And again, that’s just documented, that’s just veterinarians. I’m sure there are a lot of people who are not participating in that percentage, because there’s a lot of shame. You think about how many people are out there suffering and not coming forward for whatever reason, not getting help for whatever reason, and it’s just so complicated. I want people to know that they’re not alone. Just to have some representation out there would have made a big difference for me back then.

TVN: What is your advice for someone who may be at a different point in their journey and is looking for resources or ways to talk to people?

LAROCK: It took me a long time to get here, and you don’t have to tell your colleagues. It’s not anybody else’s business; you can keep these things to yourself. But if you are in the veterinary space and you do get to the point that you would like to simply share your story with others that can deeply relate to what you’re going through, there is a Facebook group called Veterinary Professionals in Recovery. I started it with a veterinarian named Dr. Philip Richmond. Basically, the only people allowed in that group are people who are either interested in recovery or have been in recovery. You can be a silent observer and watch the stories of what people are sharing and find comfort and connection in seeing what your colleagues are experiencing. Or you could share as well, even as an anonymous poster. That can be a gentle introduction into sharing your story and finding community.

TVN: During your experiences with recovery, did you find that you had to take a look at mental health as part of the whole process?

LAROCK: A lot of people who are struggling in active addiction or alcoholism have a lot of things that they’re trying to escape. I know, personally, I became an alcoholic because when I was 14 or 15, I started

experimenting with drugs and I learned that it was a very wonderful, powerful escape. From then on, I took that coping mechanism into adulthood and did not have any healthy ways to deal with my problems, address them, reflect—I didn’t do any of that. I was always looking for an escape. That’s often a result of trauma, complications in the home, or whatever it may be. I had a lot of mental health struggles that I had yet to address. So, when I got sober, honestly, therapy saved my life. I didn’t even really know myself because I was a shell of a person. There was no self-reflection that was ever happening with me. All I could do was escape, escape, escape, make it to the next day and see what happens.

I got into therapy, right when I got sober, and for a while I was in therapy twice a week because I was really struggling. Getting sober, yes, that’s good. But people don’t talk about once you’re sober, all the feelings come back. This is the first time in a long time that you’re actually having to experience life, your trauma, your emotions without the assistance that you’re used to. So it all comes flooding in, and you need to have some type of mental health support because it’s going to be a lot to handle if you try to do it yourself. Even with the support system, having professional help really makes such a big difference. It was really life-saving.

TVN: How have your experiences changed your mindset about working in veterinary medicine?

LAROCK: It’s changed my mindset on everything. Honestly, I think back on the technician I was 10 years ago and who I am now and I just want to cringe thinking, “That girl thought she knew it all.” I’ve learned that there is not a single situation that you can’t approach with kindness. Of course, we’re going to encounter those difficult colleagues and clients. But at the end of the day, I try to remember that it’s never personal. I did learn this in the ER setting after getting sober. I’d been doing a lot of work with my mental health, I’d been traveling a bit, and I would come back and do relief shifts at the ER. I felt like a totally different person than I was a few years prior working as a full-time technician before I started getting into therapy, traveling, and learning a bit more about the world. I realized that at the end of my shift I was feeling so much less stressed, so much less triggered. I just try so hard to approach everything with as much kindness and compassion and understanding as I possibly can. People will still be difficult, but I don’t think we’re ever going to regret trying to meet someone where they’re at. — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**