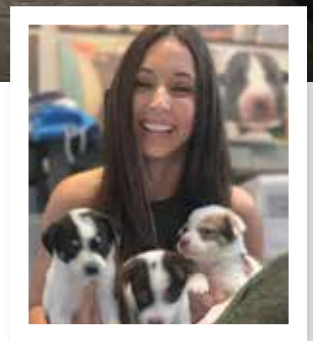


**CLINIC CHAMPION:**

Kathryn Mongrain, LVT

The Bottle Brigade, Houston, Texas



Beep. Beep. Beep. Every 2 hours, Kathryn Mongrain's alarm sounds, and she shuffles with bleary eyes into what used to be a dining room to carry out her passion project: bottle feeding and attending to neonatal puppies (and the occasional kitten). You won't find a dining table, chairs, and place settings in this room, but in their place incubators, IV pumps, and oxygen concentrators.



Mongrain, an LVT who works in a 24/7 emergency and critical care (ECC) facility in Houston, Texas, is well accustomed to this strict wake-up call by now. For the past 7 years, she has been caring for puppies born with physical deformities or special medical needs. She is the force behind The Bottle Brigade, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on rehabilitating and caring for neonates that have been abandoned and require special care. Mongrain has the capacity to take on 3 to 4 “babies,” as she calls them, at a time and nurses them to a state where they can head to a shelter or directly to a new family. After finding an interest in ECC during an externship, Mongrain starting working at an ECC hospital and quickly saw the sad reality that many veterinary professionals know all too well: countless newborns that are surrendered.

“That is where my passion started—watching so many babies get euthanized every single night for something that was out of their court,” she said. “They had no control over that, when they’re bred and they have a deformity. They’re just discarded like trash or people don’t have the funds to take care of them.”

With the support of her husband, Devin, Mongrain has cared for hundreds of neonatal puppies over the years, sacrificing many hours of sleep and a dining room.

“Word started to spread that I would take in the medical babies, so not only do I take in from the emergency clinic, but there’s tons of people around Houston and even out of state that contact me about babies that are born with special needs or need medical help,” said Mongrain.

She takes on many puppies that are born with a cleft palate, along with neonates that aspirate or have pneumonia. The Bottle Brigade was set up as a “middle-man” rescue. Mongrain knew she could not

have the resources or space to create a full shelter while also working full time, but she wanted to fill the gap for these patients that need extra care until they can return to another rescue or adopting family. She built a dedicated following on social media (@thebottlebrigade) thanks to her detailed updates on the puppies under her care. Many people from Texas and nearby areas assist Mongrain by connecting her with willing adopters, and countless donors from across the country provide The Bottle Brigade with financial support.

We spoke with Mongrain to learn more about her passion for helping neonates and more.

TODAY’S VETERINARY NURSE: Is there a success story that sticks out among your experiences?

KATHRYN MONGRAIN: The one that always pops in my head is a little dog named Hammy, a Frenchie who went through so much. He was dealing with hydrocephalus and had a cleft palate pneumonia. We worked with him for months and months to get his lungs to heal. We would get them better, and then he would immediately aspirate again. It was such an ongoing challenge for us to get him healthy. There were days that I thought that he was never going to pull through, and he just kept trucking along. The director of his rescue ended up adopting him, and he had his cleft surgery and he lives the most amazing life. Now he has no issues with his lungs or anything. He’s the most amazing dog and he’s got the most amazing family.

Another one that comes to mind is Sally, she was a little dachshund that was born with no deformities at all, she just happened to aspirate on her mom. She was nursing on her mom and she swallowed the milk wrong. When a friend asked me to take her on, I said, “Yeah, I’ll definitely take her on.” What I thought was going to be a normal pneumonia case turned into almost the worst



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.



thing of my life. We could not get her out of oxygen for 10 weeks straight. Anywhere we would go, we would have to travel with oxygen in this bubble to keep her breathing. She was on the verge of death almost every single day and she would turn purple if we turned down the oxygen. Her story was another one that I'll never forget because every day I would stare over the bubble to see if she was alive or breathing. I wasn't sure if she was going to wake up, and 10 weeks later, she finally was able to come out of oxygen. She was adopted by one of my coworkers, so I get to see her all the time. Now she runs in the weenie races at the local bars. She has no issues with her lungs at all anymore. What we thought was a puppy that was never going to be able to breathe at room air is now winning these little weenie races!

TVN: How did your at-home nursery start and evolve to where it is today?

MONGRAIN: We started off with something very small. We had a little bassinet for the puppies, and we would

place it wherever we were in the house. When we were sleeping, we had it right next to us in the bedroom. As we took in more and needed more equipment, we also needed more space, so we moved the nursery upstairs into a room that we didn't really use, and we created an entire nursery upstairs. As time went on, it was really hard to go down the stairs and into the kitchen to warm the milk and go back up the stairs multiple times a night, every 2 hours. So we ended up transforming our dining area into a nursery that's close to our kitchen. That is where we set up shop with all our medical equipment and medications and everything that is needed for them.

We started off with just the bassinet to confine the babies to where we could put a heating pad in there and keep them warm and that was really it. We then started acquiring incubators to help maintain their temperatures; that's a very important part of having neonates is keeping them warm, they can't regulate their temperature. We invested in these incubators, and they're not small things. We then had to dedicate a space to put a very large table to put these incubators on. And that grew and grew and grew—we now have oxygen chambers, we have oxygen concentrators, we have IV pumps, and more. We have so much stuff, and it's used every single day. What was a bassinet is now a nursery full of equipment and medical supplies that we use to treat the babies. And all around the nursery are pictures that are canvas prints of all the babies that we have saved. We had so many that we ran out of wall

THE BOTTLE BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS

Over the course of several years, Mongrain expanded the medical equipment available in her home, allowing her to offer special care, such as oxygen support, for newborns.





space, so we couldn't put all of them up there. We've got entire walls covered in pictures of the babies that we have saved.

TVN: Between a demanding job in an emergency hospital and this time-intensive care you provide at home, how do you balance it all?

MONGRAIN: It takes a lot of passion, love, and patience to do this. I am fortunate enough to be able to work a job where I can bring the babies with me because they need 'round-the-clock care. A lot of people are unable to help because they work full-time jobs and they're not obviously able to bring a puppy to work with them, or feed them every hour to 2 hours. I already work nights, as I have for the past 7 years, so I'm already up through the night. There is definitely a lot of missed sleep, but it's so worth it. It's so worth putting in the time so you can see them thrive and go on to their new homes and get adopted. You have this dog that was being euthanized or discarded, that is now somebody's best friend for the rest of their life. It's so rewarding, and it's worth the lack of sleep. But it does get hard. I always tell my husband that I feel terrible for him, because my alarm goes off every 2 hours. And then he has to get up for work. There are times where I'm so tired that I want to sleep through my alarm and he has to nudge me to get up. It can take a toll on your mental health and everything else that's affected by sleep. Sometimes we have to take breaks just to catch up on sleep and our mental health. But it's hard to take a long break.

TVN: What's your schedule on a normal day?

MONGRAIN: I usually work my shifts in a row, which is challenging, but it's actually a little bit easier for me because it gives me a couple of days off to recoup. My normal shift is 5 PM to 5 AM, and that's usually Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. Then we have an on-call shift as well during the day. On a normal day, we pack up to head to work at 5 PM, and I work my shift. At 5 AM, I come back home, unload all the babies into the nursery again, get them all fed, hop in the shower, and get in bed for maybe an hour or 2 and set my alarm to wake up to feed the babies again. That's the routine. Then I set my alarm again, wake up, feed, go back to sleep. I sleep basically until the point I have to get back up to get ready for work again, load them all back up into the car, and start over for the next couple of days. On my days off it's a little bit nicer. I nap sporadically throughout the day. But on my off days I have to do things like clean the house and go to the grocery store and cook. It can be challenging, but once you get a routine down, it's not too bad.



A STRONG-WILLED PUPPY

Mongrain has brought in hundreds of neonates over the years, but Hammy (above), a French bulldog who overcame multiple medical issues, is one of the most memorable.

TVN: Were you surprised to see the community grow around the Bottle Brigade and so much support from others?

MONGRAIN: The outreach from people is amazing. It baffles me that there are so many people out there that are so quick to give up babies, but there are so many people out there willing to help. We now teach classes on bottle feeding and tube feedings so we can reach out to other people to jump in and help because one person can only do so much. We have amazing donors that have never met these babies in person; they're from different states and they donate to help the babies' medical needs and to cover supplies. We have such an amazing following of people who just love the babies as much as we do—and they've never met them. They fall in love with these babies through our Facebook and Instagram and TikTok and all that. They are a huge part of why we can continue to do what we do. Before we had our nonprofit set up, I was pulling out of my own personal funds to do a lot of this stuff. It was so hard to keep going and help these babies knowing I didn't have the funds to do so. And even though we have really amazing donors, medical supplies are so expensive. Just when I think that we have raised enough money for something, another one comes in and just drains the funds again. It's a constant cycle of not being able to afford what we really need in order to save them. But that's where our community comes in. We couldn't do it without them. — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**