



PREVENTION FIRST
Lahari Kankar (right) assists with vaccine administration during a mobile pop-up clinic with the Underdog Community Project.

CLINIC CHAMPIONS

The City of Angels

Lahari Kankar, RVT, Builds Community by Providing Veterinary Care for Her Most Vulnerable Neighbors.

Underdog Community Project, Los Angeles, California



For Lahari Kankar, RVT, it all started with a single cat. “I moved to a new place, and there was an adorable little kitten, and I wanted to befriend her, but she was still very scared,” she said. “Before I knew it, this kitten was pregnant and having her own kittens—it was a complete shock to me.”



That's when Kankar began her research about the estimated 1 million-plus feral cats in the greater Los Angeles area and the challenges associated with controlling the population.

"I learned that in Los Angeles, because of our constant warm weather, heat cycles and kittens happen sooner," Kankar said. "There's no end to 'kitten season' here."

In the process of finding ways to help this single cat, Kankar discovered a community of people with the same goal. She began getting involved with trap-neuter-release (TNR) initiatives and finding different ways to help pets and the people who care for them. Kankar's desire to get more involved in the community led her to the Underdog Community Project, a 501(c)3 organization that provides veterinary care via pop-up and mobile clinics at no cost.

The group, for which Kankar serves as vice president and medical coordinator, holds monthly clinics in Skid Row, a downtown Los Angeles neighborhood that has among the largest populations of unhoused individuals in the country. Through this hands-on work, Kankar has gained a new perspective on building a sense of community with her neighbors and fellow veterinary professionals.

"I knew there was a lot of people that weren't able to afford care for their pets, and I knew that there was a large issue with homelessness in Los Angeles. But even though I've lived here my entire life, I never really saw it with my own eyes," Kankar said. "This was my first time really seeing the systemic problem ... It's just been really nice to know that there's a community of people that are out there trying to combat this issue and putting their resources together to help the people in our community."

We spoke with Kankar about the Underdog Community Project and the importance of building trust through veterinary care.

TODAY'S VETERINARY NURSE: What inspired you to pursue a veterinary career and how has that led to where you are today?

LAHARI KANKAR: Growing up, I've always really loved cats. Living in Los Angeles, there is a huge population of stray cats, and I just got really involved in taking care of the cats in my community, meeting other people that were doing the same thing, and building these relationships within my community. Through that

experience, I began to learn more about other people's struggles and finding out that the people who are struggling to take care of themselves are still going out of their way to take care of stray cats in their neighborhood. That made me wonder if I can support other people who are having difficulty meeting the veterinary needs of their pets. And it started with meeting stray cats and trappers and the TNR community, and it evolved to meeting people who are struggling with homelessness and seeing how they still do the best they can to take care of their pets.

TVN: Why is it important to build relationships and trust with people who do not have access to or the ability to afford veterinary care?

KANKAR: The ability to have a one-on-one conversation is the most valuable thing. For example, we've had clients come up to us for the very first time with a new puppy that they either found on the street or came to them from a neighbor who was getting rid of a puppy. It's their first time owning a pet. They have lots of questions, and they don't really know what to do. They come to us, and we are able to tell them about vaccines, things to watch out for, and we're able to start the conversation about spay and neuter. And many times, the very first thing they say is, "Oh, we absolutely don't want to spay or neuter. That's not something we're interested in." We don't push it right away, but we start providing the other services. We give

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Today's Veterinary Nurse aims to shine a light on inspiring 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.



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them some deworming, and we start asking, “Hey, how come you don’t want to fix your pet?” Oftentimes, they have concerns about things they were told from other people and that come from a lack of knowledge. Being able to step in and provide them with the benefits of spay/neuter, explain to them how it’s safe, and also have other clients backing us and telling them, “Hey, this is a good organization. You can trust them. They want to help you take care of your pets.” That is so important. Having that community trust us helps us serve more pets.

TVN: What are some of the biggest needs for this community, and what are the most common issues you see in your monthly clinics?

KANKAR: In Los Angeles, there’s a need for all services: veterinary services, human services, social services. We’re just a piece of the puzzle, and we are trying to provide support where we can. The need for veterinary care in downtown Los Angeles keeps growing, because the population of Skid Row and the community of

A SHARED FOCUS

Kankar found a network of like-minded volunteers while researching ways to help stray cats in Los Angeles.



An Underdog Story

The Underdog Community Project is 1 of many programs working together to provide veterinary care and other services for communities in Los Angeles that do not have access to housing or veterinary care. To learn more about this work and offer support, visit underdogcommunityproject.org or follow the group on social media @underdogcommunityproject.

unhoused individuals keeps becoming larger. One of the main needs is access to vaccines. In order for our clients to get housing services with their pets, they usually will need vaccine certifications, which is one of the barriers to housing. For many of our clients, they’re not able to access housing because they need to have a certificate for their pet, and they’re not able to afford the veterinary exam that goes with that and the treatment. One of the main things we do is we provide the documentation that allows our clients to get housing with their pets. Many people choose to stay on the streets and are not able to access housing or shelter programs because they don’t want to leave their pets, and there are very few programs for pet owners. So, we are working with other organizations trying to advocate for pet-inclusive housing.

TVN: What have you learned during your experiences with the Underdog Community Project?

KANKAR: I think in any hospital or practice setting, one of the most difficult conversations or aspects is when clients can’t financially afford the care for their pets. Oftentimes, you present an estimate and you tell them that these are the things that we’re going to need to help your pet get better, and of course the client wants to, but for other circumstances they’re not able to afford the care. Seeing people doing their best to take care of their pets but sometimes being unable to and seeing the distress that causes is difficult. Having this opportunity where we can provide services without having to have any sort of conversation about finances has been really amazing. Being able to remove financial barriers from clients, help them take care of their pets, and see the relief on their faces is really a rewarding experience. — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**