



CLINIC CHAMPIONS

A Call to Action

Whether it's through disaster response or helping new hires, Lexi Dickens believes in the power of building others up.

DEGA Mobile Veterinary Care, North Carolina



Lexi Dickens, BS, LVT, RVT, VTS (ECC), couldn't help but feel her emotions build when she saw western North Carolina in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. "I am not normally a very emotional person, and I was in tears driving through what was once a town," she said.

Dickens—who hails from the Triangle region of North Carolina, further east from the areas that received the brunt of the historic storm—usually provides basic preventive services when volunteering with DEGA Mobile Veterinary Care. But as she headed west to offer her services to those affected by the storm, desperate times called for a different approach.

“With Helene, it was a completely different kind of setup. We still provided the vaccines and things like that, but we went up there and faced totally new situations,” Dickens said. “We heard, ‘My dog has this laceration because it got caught in the mudslide,’ or, ‘All of a sudden, my dog’s having some GI upset, and I can’t get into the vet.’ Or there is no vet or the vet doesn’t have water.”

A horse lover at heart, Dickens worked toward becoming a licensed veterinary technician with visions of enjoying a long career in equine medicine. But, in a surprise development during her training, she fell in love with small animal care and the fast pace of emergency medicine. She saw her career shift once again into a training role, where she now works as a senior patient care training coordinator for BluePearl Pet Hospital in Cary, North Carolina. Despite the unexpected turns and hard work in the classroom, Dickens wouldn’t have it any other way.

“One of the most amazing veterinarians I’ve ever worked with went to veterinary school in her 50s,” she said. “That taught me that it’s never too late to try something new or change your career or do something that’s going to make you happier.”

Through it all, Dickens had a passion to give back. She gets to stay in touch with her primary care roots by volunteering with DEGA, a volunteer-run organization truly living up to its name (short for “Determined for Everyone to Gain Access”) by offering free mobile care throughout the state for those who need it. Dickens, who has worked with DEGA since 2021, knows that whether it’s an emergency response to a major hurricane or a monthly clinic offering parasite protection, this work is making an impact.

“Everybody falls on hard times and everybody deserves to keep the pet that they would do anything for. This has helped me appreciate the human–animal bond on a different level,” said Dickens. “I’ve met the kindest people who would do anything for their pet before they’ll feed themselves or give themselves a blanket.”



We spoke with Dickens about her career growth and experience working with a volunteer mobile clinic.

TODAY’S VETERINARY NURSE: When did training and education become something that you realized you enjoyed and could be a career opportunity?

LEXI DICKENS: I have always loved to train and teach people. I’m a little bit disappointed in the veterinary industry because of how we are not always the nicest or welcoming to new hires. Everybody in the field has heard the phrase “thrown to the wolves,” and I don’t want anyone to feel like that. Our industry is struggling

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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.



→ SCAN THE QR CODE to nominate a veterinary nurse/ technician.



to keep people, so the kindness of teaching really resonates with me. Also, as a VTS, I do have a relatively high skill set. While I love to be called on and everybody wants to feel needed to perform a skill, a central line, an arterial blood draw, or something like that, to watch somebody else learn it and feel confident in doing it is where my cup gets filled. I want to spread my knowledge. When I see someone's face light up because they understand it, it's pure joy for me.

TVN: You spoke about the importance of creating a supportive environment within the profession. What would be your advice for others in leadership positions to contribute?

DICKENS: It's more simple than a lot of us make it out to be. No. 1 is to always be welcoming. I remind myself that I was a baby technician coming right out of school once. We all had blind spots. Sometimes you don't know what you don't know. People who are timid or worried about it, I tell them not to overthink it. Talking through what you're doing and explaining as you're doing something as simple as a PCV or placing a catheter, that can allow them the opportunity to ask questions, and they'll feel more comfortable. Showing kindness and remembering we were all there at one

time are both so important. And, on the flip side, the more that you teach this individual, the more they're going to help you by being another successful body on the floor.

BACK TO HER ROOTS

Volunteering with DEGA allows Dickens to stay in touch with the preventive care she does not experience often as a senior patient care training coordinator at an emergency hospital.



How to Help With North Carolina Recovery

Despite the news cycle moving on and other natural disasters occurring, recovery from Hurricane Helene will continue in western North Carolina for the foreseeable future. Lexi Dickens identified 3 reputable organizations that are actively working in the area for those who are interested in offering support.

BeLoved Asheville

A nonprofit organization sourcing critical necessities for local residents and securing housing for those displaced by the storm
belovedasheville.com

Convoy of Hope

This nonprofit continues to rebuild damaged homes and contribute to disaster response in North Carolina and the greater Southeast.

convoyofhope.org

Mitchell County Animal Rescue

This shelter is based in one of the hardest-hit areas and serves the area's most vulnerable companion animals.

mitchellcountyanimalrescue.org

Something that I also feel passionate about is patient safety event reporting. When medical issues happen, we have a platform at BluePearl where we can report them, and I am one of the patient safety liaisons. There's a bunch of us all over the country, and I think that part of being in training is knowing that mistakes are going to happen. It's up to us to find ways to prevent them from happening and support those people who've made a mistake. I can tell you every mistake I've made in a clinic, because it's upsetting and you'll never do it again, but providing support for them in those situations and the training to help them understand how the error happened is so important. All of it starts with psychological safety. The person who made the mistake has to be in an environment where they feel comfortable coming forward and saying, "I made a mistake," and not being worried about getting yelled at or fired. Then, they need to have that open communication to say, "OK, how did this mistake happen?"

TVN: Some people growing into leadership roles can feel intimidated or experience imposter syndrome. How did you deal with that transition and what is your advice for others?

DICKENS: I can speak very much to imposter syndrome because I feel it very often. It's actually something that I am trying to work through. I got my first opportunity to write a book chapter and I thought, *Oh my gosh. How am I allowed to do this?* One step is making sure you have a really great support system. They bring you back to the ground and allow you to think, *OK, take a deep breath, you've got this, you've got resources, you've got help.* I know it sounds corny, but believing in yourself and having that positive mindset really does make a big difference. Also, good communication in every aspect is really important. If you'll put in the hard work, have good communication, and keep a positive mindset, there are endless things that you can achieve.

TVN: It's hard for people outside of the immediate area to understand what the recovery looks like for a natural disaster like this. How would you describe it?

DICKENS: The biggest thing I can say is that the need is still here. I have goosebumps talking about the first time that I drove up there. I am not normally a very emotional person, and I was in tears driving through what was once a town. Today is January 7 and the hurricane was the beginning of October. There are still people who don't have water, who don't have electricity, and don't have a home. And it's very cold up there right now. The community up there has really done everything they can to come together, but the impact is still going to be there for years. I would just want people to realize that it's not over, so if you still see things about donating, please consider it. People are still up there living in tents and campers. You see on the news that the bigger cities have running clean water, but the smaller ones definitely don't. It's humbling, knowing that the recovery is still happening.

TVN: What has been your most memorable experience with DEGA?

DICKENS: It's not necessarily a single interaction, but it's when you can make a positive impact on someone who has fallen on hard times. I can think of a clinic where this woman had an engineering degree and she had been laid off and she ended up homeless. Some people deal with things like addiction, but seeing the gratitude and full-hearted joy when their pet receives care—they're incredibly grateful. When you have that pet owner that you can see in their body language and face the love for their pet and how important they are to them; when you are able to help them, even if it's a rabies vaccine, deworming, and some flea treatment, that is an amazing experience. — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**



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