



CLINIC CHAMPIONS

Breaking the Cycle

After an extended break, Melody Martinez, CVT, returned to veterinary medicine to help build a better future for her colleagues and community.

Portland, Oregon



It took leaving the profession for Melody Martinez, CVT, to find her place in it. Martinez spent her early years in veterinary medicine collecting experiences and new skills, from working on a farm sanctuary in upstate New York to an emergency and critical care hospital on the other side of the country in Portland, Oregon.



“Through every one of these transformations—and this is true for a lot of technicians, whether they stay in the field, leave the field, or move through different iterations of their role—I learned more about myself,” Martinez said. “And I learned in emergency and critical care that I really love people ... I loved the aspect of being connected to the client and helping them be a better caregiver for their pet or for their family member.”

But as Martinez progressed through stages of life and her financial responsibilities grew, she took on a second job.

“I would work my night shift [at the veterinary hospital], go home for a couple of hours, take a nap, and then go to my other job, which was working as a conference organizer at a statewide food bank,” she said. When her daytime gig offered a full-time position—and a significant salary increase—Martinez left a nearly 10-year career working in veterinary medicine amid “heartbreak, hand-wringing, and an identity crisis.”

But Martinez continued to learn more about herself and her passion for helping people along the way. After 8 years in the social justice nonprofit and philanthropy sectors, Martinez was drawn back to veterinary medicine through the opportunity to work with the Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association



ALL CREATURES Melody Martinez has worked in a variety of settings during her career, including a farm animal sanctuary (opposite) and a low-cost nonprofit clinic (above).

(MCVMA). The result? A return to her roots with newfound skills, confidence, and direction.

“With this reentry into the veterinary space, I felt like I was coming home,” Martinez said. “Ending up back in this place after I intentionally decided to reengage with the profession, I feel more secure, happy, and excited about my role as a technician than I ever have—or at least since I started.”

Martinez has solidified her place, working as the founder of Acorde Consulting, the executive director for the MCVMA, and as a volunteer veterinary technician for The Portland Animal Welfare (PAW) Team.

We spoke with Martinez about the lessons she’s learned during her career journey, her hopes for the profession, and the keys to creating a sustainable career for veterinary nurses/technicians.

TODAY’S VETERINARY NURSE: What was it like jumping back into the practice after taking several years off? How would you describe the learning curve to someone who might be nervous about facing a similar transition?

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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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MELODY MARTINEZ: That's a great question, because I think it's a very common fear. It's definitely one that I had when I started volunteering again with my technical skills. I felt very scared, like I had forgotten how to do this. What's interesting is that, early in my career, I took a 1-month break from work. I was going through something very difficult, and my chief medical officer said, "Why don't you take a month off, regroup, and come back fresh?" I remember asking her, "What if I forget how to do stuff?" And she's like, "Melody, it's only 4 weeks. You're not going to forget how to draw blood. You'll be fine." And she was right.

But then, after 8 years away, I was having similar concerns. I was still keeping up my license, and even during that gap I felt it was important to continue with my CE. But I still felt very scared going back into the

clinic. And the reality is, it is like getting back on a bike. Once I was in the right environment—meaning I had my materials, I knew what I was looking for, I knew what I was doing—it felt very natural. But it also helped to find the right clinic space. In this case, I found the right doctors and colleagues who were very welcoming. They had the mentality of: "Hey, don't worry. Let's get you back on the microscope and let's remind you how to do XYZ."

If you've taken a break, you can come back and show up in different ways. I didn't jump back into emergency and critical care. If I had done that, there would have been a bigger learning curve for me, because I'd only done it for about 2 years before I left. But the important thing is feeling supported and knowing that these folks understand that I'm jumping back in, even if it's part-time or relief. They know I'm jumping back in, and it feels like it's a good culture for me to ask questions and slowly dive back into this work. There is muscle memory. Your body knows things, your mind knows things. You just need to find the right supportive environment.

TVN: When you returned to a veterinary role with new skills and a sense of self, what were the main issues that you felt were important to work on or address in veterinary medicine?

MARTINEZ: Almost 2 decades have passed since I started working in vet med. I want to see more diversity in the profession. I want to see a profession that meets the needs of pet owners, no matter what they look like, what languages they speak, or where they live. I want to nurture the human–animal bond for everyone. The second thing is, and this came out of my work in an emergency hospital, was access to care. In emergency and critical care, you're seeing people on one of their worst days. Their animal may be crashing or very sick, and they're scared because that's their family member. And for a lot of people, the cost of care is so far out of reach. That is especially true for people who might have lost their homes or their job. They might have had

some major life change that ended up with them experiencing homelessness, whether it's living outside, hopping couch to couch, living in a car, or the many ways in which homelessness can look.

I would be in many situations reporting to someone that their

ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Martinez has a passion for increasing access to veterinary care and community engagement, which led her to volunteer at PAW Team in Portland (left).



cat's blocked, and it's going to cost \$4000. They can't afford it. They can barely afford \$400. This is an issue I really wanted to work on. What does it mean to address that? What does it mean to look at each family and say, "You're worthy of staying whole, and whatever we can do to help you stay whole, that's part of our duty as veterinary professionals"? Those issues became clear when I asked myself: If I were to choose how I want to engage in vet med, where would I go?

But also, I don't think that was necessarily there 10 or 12 years ago. I don't remember talking about access to care or the human-animal bond. When I stepped away, those conversations weren't happening in the spaces that I was in, and I didn't know how to name them, I didn't have the words for them, but that's what I was looking for. I feel like it was this kismet thing, the timing is perfect. I left, I learned some things that could help strengthen my understanding of access to care and diversity in the profession, and then I entered the profession with those new skill sets, having more to offer than my technical skills. I tell technicians now: "Whatever you can do to build yourself up professionally and personally, that's all going to help in your work." It's about finding those avenues. What do you love? How can you make it a part of your work?

TVN: It seems that for the spectrum of care approach to be fully realized, it requires a deeper level of communication with clients and understanding of their situation. Do you think this is an opportunity for veterinary nurses/technicians to step into a bigger role for that communication and for practice leaders to entrust them to do so?

MARTINEZ: Yes, yes, yes. If we can trust our technicians to do advanced technical tasks, then we can definitely trust them to have these conversations. And when I say trust them, let's say there is a practice owner who wants to entrust this sort of communication to their technicians, but they want to make sure it happens in a certain way. Then let's train that. Let's talk about it. Let's mentor the technician to be able to have that conversation. It can free up time for the veterinarian or allow them to have that conversation at a different level once a diagnosis is made.

It's important to help technicians build trust with the client, because I hear: "Oh, clients don't share with the technician what they share with the doctor." But why is that? Is it because the doctor has authority? We need to start building that credibility for the veterinary nurse/



technician so the client sees them as a medical professional who can be trusted. They need to be seen as someone who can share that information and get it back to the team for problem solving.

That's history taking. That's gathering context that will help the doctor walk into that room and say, "My technician shared this with me. Is this correct?" That's where the doctor can say, "Here's the spectrum of care from this starting point." It's more efficient to work that way. And who doesn't want more efficiency in their clinic?

TVN: What are the biggest areas for growth when it comes to retention and creating a sustainable career path for veterinary nurses/technicians, whether they be systemic things or low-hanging fruit that can be addressed in a practice tomorrow?

MARTINEZ: First, I want to recognize the systemic things. There are a lot of people talking about those issues, but I think they're very important. No. 1 is utilization. One of the most important factors for job satisfaction is making people feel like they have a clear

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purpose and a way in which they can contribute the skills that they've learned. No. 2 is pay. I think about the time in my career when I had to have 2 jobs to get by. I was working night shifts from 11 PM to 9 AM and then sleeping for a couple of hours, taking my dogs out, and then getting ready to go to my next job. I was exhausted, and at that time I was at a hospital that was among the highest-paying in my area. I did not have options to take a position at another hospital, because the pay wasn't going to be much more. When I was in my 20s and living with roommates, it worked out. But I think about people who want to have kids or so many more things that they might want to do with their lives, and they can't because they can't afford it. So, pay is a big piece of the puzzle.

But when it comes to the day-to-day, I recommend asking your technicians: What motivates you? What do you love about this? What do you want to do? I remember my last clinic saying to me, "What could we do to keep you?" But at the time, I didn't have the word for veterinary social work. It didn't exist in my world. I would say, "I'm not sure, I want to work with people." So, they tried to put me at the front desk or to work as a shift supervisor. They kept trying to figure it out, but it never addressed my real interest. It would have been interesting if someone had said to me at that time, "Melody, what is it that motivates you?" And I would say, "I love helping people get access to care. I want to help raise funds and subsidize care for patients with good prognosis and clients who may not have the resources to treat them." We did have an angel fund at my clinic. My manager could have said, "I think we have something for you. We still need you on the floor, but let's try it out part time." That would have really helped retain me in the profession. The key is to get to know your people. Get to know what motivates them, what they love, and, even if it's unconventional, see how you might help them achieve their goals.

Maybe you have a person who really loves social media or communications work. Why don't we have them help with our monthly newsletter to our clients? You can ask in 1-on-1 meetings: "What do you want to learn? It doesn't have to be technical. How do you want to help our clinic? How do you want to help our clinic grow? What is it that you dream about?" I would have said I dream about helping the community. My manager might have said, "Hmm, I may not know how to do that, but let's talk about it more. Let's figure something out." That would have given me hope; it would have been huge. — *By Andy Zunz* **TVN**