Vintage Pet Rescue: The Joy and Heartbreak of Taking in and Caring for Senior Dogs
A Special Interview With Kristen Peralta
By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Becker, and today we have the honor of interviewing Kristen Peralta. She was nominated for a Game Changer award by Dave. Dave submitted a beautiful history about the work that Kristen is doing, and she's joining us today to tell us more about her work rescuing animals.

Kristen, congratulations on your Game Changer award, and also we're so happy that you are here to tell us more about the amazing work that you're doing.

Kristen Peralta:

Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. I'm honored. I started Vintage Pet Rescue back in 2017, and it evolved very organically. I met my husband in Los Angeles. He was working for Best Friends Animal Society, and I was volunteering for a rescue group. We met and we ended up taking home a little white hospice dog that was at the shelter and we just didn't want to see her in the shelter. We thought we would take her home and have her for a few months and spoil her. We named her Rue McClanahan, and she actually ended up living in our home with us for about a year and a half before she passed away. When she did pass away, we went and we adopted another senior dog in her memory and it just spiraled there. Vintage Pet Rescue was not even a thought in our head at that point. At that point we were just taking in these senior dogs that no one else really wanted.

Then when we actually moved – I'm from Rhode Island, so when I convinced my husband to move from sunny Los Angeles to rainy, cold Rhode Island in 2017, that's when we actually started Vintage Pet Rescue, and actually made it 501(c)(3) and an actual rescue. I honestly thought we'd have 10, 20 dogs every year coming through our doors and we'd be a sanctuary. They would stay with us until they passed away. Well, the need for senior rescues is much, much higher than I anticipated. Just last year we actually took in 255 senior hospice, special needs dogs. Found homes for about 220 of those. Some are still in foster care or with forever fosters. It's kind of exploded. It's definitely not what I anticipated when we started this five years ago, but we're changing a lot of lives and touching a lot of people and that's really special.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's amazing. I have to guess, because when you moved home and you had to reestablish new relationships, of course, because you haven't been there in a while and meet new friends and meet like-minded people that understood your mission, I have to assume in this short five-year period that you've really grown probably quite a network of local volunteers and help because that's a lot of animals. Are you all foster-centered? I mean, I know that you have animals in your home of course, but are you building this massive foster network because you – I don't want to

say unanticipated the needs of senior pets, but yes, there are always more animals that need help that maybe we have hands. You must have accrued a lot of hands quickly.

Kristen Peralta:

We did. We definitely did. Yes, I have created quite a great network. I'm not going to say that it's extensive, but the people that I have, I really trust and they know a lot about senior dogs and they're able to troubleshoot and figure things out so that's really special, that's what's necessary. I'd rather have 10 really great fosters than 50 that aren't comfortable with the seniors. We definitely have a great, small foster network. I have amazing volunteers. Most of the dogs in the rescue are in our home. Right now, currently, we have 25 in the house. We have had up to about 35 in the house and they all live – it's cage-free. They all live – actually, I'm in the rescue room, if you guys – I can turn it around so you guys can see the rescue room.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Love it. I love it.

Kristen Peralta:

We're cage-free. They're all sleeping right now. It's nap time. We have these little areas that they can eat in private if they are on a special diet or if they want to eat everybody's food. Most of the dogs do come straight to our home. They live here, we'll get them vetted, we'll get to know them, we'll write their bio, and then we'll have people who are interested in fostering or adopting come here to get them. We will take some dogs from other states, and we do have some great fosters in other states that will just keep the dogs with them in the state that they're in and we work with them that way. Yes, we did, we made a great network.

We've even, last year we actually extended, we started a community outreach program. We're actually going into different housing authorities in Rhode Island, low-income seniors who have pets, and we are bringing supplies and groomers and vets and vet techs into their building because most of them don't drive. We're bringing the resources and the supplies they need directly to them. Then if they do need additional vetting, we actually pay for that. We'll cover that financially. We started it last year and this year we're really expanding it to help as many seniors with pet services that we can.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's an amazing outreach. Obviously, you identified that as a need in your community and then you stepped up and you're filling that. Seniors who have senior pets still need senior care and you're providing that bridge, which is amazing.

I'm sure that sometimes older mom and dads or – how do the senior animals get to you? I'm sure from a variety of things, people die. That is how I got my senior dog, is a local man died in a nursing home and he had a senior dog. Would you say that it's from all – do you have humane societies calling you saying, "Hey, I have a really old dog that's not kenneling well, could you help?" Or is it a whole variety of different backgrounds of how the senior dogs come to you?

Kristen Peralta:

Yes. We have a ton of different places that dogs come to us. The vast majority, though, come directly from owners who either pass away and their family reaches out to us, or the owner is going into assisted living or going into a nursing home and can no longer care for the animal, or they're going through chemo or a long hospitalization and they can't care for the animal. That's where we get the vast majority of our surrenders. We do have some great relationships with local shelters here, local shelters in Connecticut. A lot of them will reach out to us when they have an older dog who probably would not do well in a kennel environment. We have some great connections with them and different rescues.

One thing I really tried to do when I moved here to Rhode Island is really try to connect the rescue community. I actually created a Facebook group and I have one or two people from each rescue or shelter in Rhode Island involved so we could share ideas and share, actually supplies was kind of the big thing, because so many shelters get prescription food that they can't use and the rescues are dying to get the kidney food or the urinary food or some sort of food. If a shelter gets a case of urinary food, they'll take a picture and say, "Does anyone need this?" The rescue down the road says, "I need it," and they go and pick it up. It's actually been really great to form those connections. We try to keep the owners involved if possible. We're not like other rescues where once a dog is surrendered, that's it, there's no more communication.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So good.

Kristen Peralta:

We have had actually probably about 10 or 12 different situations where the owners have actually come to visit their animals here, or will stay in touch with the adopter or the foster to get updates. We will send updates and pictures if they want. Sometimes it's too hard for them and they'll tell us that, and we understand, but we do have that as an option to keep them involved in their pet's life if they want.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So beautiful, Kristen. Really, you're knitting together not just your community, you are filling in the blanks and building bridges to help not just mend dogs' hearts, but the humans that are attached to them. It's really wonderful.

Kristen Peralta:

Thank you.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Not anticipating that you were probably going to do senior dog rescue full-time in your life, when you wake up in the morning, what do you love most about the work that you're doing?

Kristen Peralta:

I think what I love most about the work that I'm doing is just the lives that we're changing, animal and people, like you mentioned. We really are, I mean, the messages we get and the letters we get and the emails we get from people just thanking us, just for even just bringing cat

food to them. They said, "Oh, I wouldn't be able to afford this if you didn't give it to me, and my cats would've suffered," or dog food or paying for a much-needed dental for a dog who if they didn't get the dental they were going to be euthanized. Knowing that we are helping affect these people's lives and helping them keep their animals with them, I think, is really the most exciting. The thing that really makes – that's Big Al barking in the background.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Big Al, that's good. That's good.

Kristen Peralta:

Big Al. Big Al wants dinner. That's really, I think what really keeps driving me, because this is not – it's not easy work.

Dr. Karen Becker:

No. No.

Kristen Peralta:

We deal with a lot of illness, a lot of death, a lot of different things that are tough. Dealing with the people aspect is also really tough. I understand why other rescues cut the cord, because it is draining. It's emotionally and mentally draining sometimes. We just keep doing what we can to keep a positive outlook. Sometimes I need to really give myself a kick in the butt when I'm walking around saying, "Oh my gosh, everyone's sick, everyone's dying." But that's what we do. We take in hospice dogs. We're not going to have them for 10 or 14 years. We might only have them for a few weeks, and we just have to focus on making those few weeks the best that they have.

Dr. Karen Becker:

When you think about it from an animal's perspective, because animals do live in the here and now, the animals that you bring in are so happy for the love and attention and care at this moment that if we can help be a little bit – sometimes I think animals help center us to the fact that indeed we are all finite. Being able to see, knowing that we're all terminal in some sense, but seeing that their lives are going to wrap up shortly, but yet still how much joy and happiness and ability to be happy in the present moment despite cancer or despite a failing organ system, or despite having only X amount of days or weeks left. It's so inspiring to the human soul to have the honor to be able to care for animals in that state in their last chapter because it's a means of us being able, I think, to do our own evolution and become the best versions of ourselves, understanding that we're providing this amazing opportunity for these animals to have happy days at the very end of their life. You're doing that and it's really wonderful.

Kristen, if people wanted to donate or check out the animals that are available maybe for fostering or get involved, how would they learn more about your work?

Kristen Peralta:

We have a pretty extensive social media. On Instagram it's @Vintage_Pet_Rescue. On Facebook, if you just search for Vintage Pet Rescue. We're always posting super, super cute

photos, funny photos. We try to keep it very positive even though we're dealing with a lot of heartache. We don't want to be like the sad Sarah McLaughlin ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) commercials. We want people to actually want to take in a senior dog and try this out. Also, our website is VintagePetRescue.org, and on there you can see all our adoptable dogs and there's a way to contact us on there through email and our frequently asked questions. Yeah, we're pretty accessible if people can go onto our website or on social media.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Beautiful. If you could think about, this is a hard question, if you could think about wanting people to know one thing about this really important work that you're doing that maybe they haven't thought about or maybe just something that you've recognized that you would want to share with people, what would it be?

Kristen Peralta:

I think my entire purpose of Vintage Pet Rescue and everything we're doing is really promoting senior dogs. I'll say this, taking on a senior dog or a hospice dog or a paralyzed dog, it is not for everyone, but I would really encourage everyone to think about it. If they're thinking about adding a new animal to their household, maybe they don't want a puppy and they're thinking adults, well maybe think about that 12- or 13- or 14-year old. I think the real thing is just spreading how amazing senior dogs can be and to what you were saying, it's very special to be part of the last chapter of their life. I would love for people to really think about it and consider a senior.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Excellent advice. What you're doing is amazing, Kristen. We're so thankful there are people like you in this world that have just committed their lives to helping those animals at the last chapter of their lives with still maybe months to, in some situations, seniors, months to years to give of a beautiful co-created relationship with a brand-new mom or dad that can be some of the most special, meaningful times for both the dog and the family that is able to adopt them. We appreciate all the amazing things you are doing in your community. We're also really thankful that Dave nominated you. We're also thankful that Big Al is telling us it's time to eat.

Kristen Peralta:

Big Al says it's dinner time.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Congratulations on your award. We're really thankful to have been able to learn more about Vintage Pets. Thanks so much.

Kristen Peralta:

Thank you so much. I appreciate it.