

Taking the Plunge Into New Healing Paths

A Special Interview With Dr. Peggy LaCombe

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm so excited that Fern has nominated Dr. Peggy LaCombe for a Game Changer award. And Dr. Peg is joining us today to tell us more about the amazing work that she does as a veterinarian. So, thank you, Dr. Peg for joining us, and congratulations on your Game Changer award.

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

Thank you so much. I'm honored to be here.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, we're so excited to learn more about who you are and all the amazing things that you do. Fern, when she submitted her entry, I was very touched by it because what she mentioned was that you have just been with her every step of the way, and that is a reflection of the commitment you have to your patients, and that you are just all in on every level of not just maintaining the health and wellness of animals, but that clearly you are very much in touch and take care of your clients, and it's beautiful. So, let's back up to the very beginning, and maybe you can just walk us through what inspired you to become a veterinarian and then your evolution as a practitioner.

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

Okay. So, I guess I'm like many veterinarians who knew from when they were little, that they wanted to be a vet. I always had an affinity for animals and probably more so than people. It was easier for me to communicate with animals, and we always had pets growing up, and I just love animals. And always that's what I wanted to do, is be a vet. I was told several times along the way that there's no way I could be a vet, that I didn't have the qualifications, I didn't have the right temperament or whatever, but mostly it was I had some professors in undergrad [inaudible 00:01:48], there's no way. My advisor even told me, "You're not going to get into vet school." And I didn't even get a degree. I went to Colorado State [University]. I applied when I was a junior at NAU (Northern Arizona University) and just for practice because I wanted to know what it was like to apply for the following year, and I actually got admitted that year, so.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Oh great.

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

That was good. I'm like, "Okay. So, my path is going along." So that's where I went to school, and I was a traditional vet for a long time. I didn't come to alternative medicine for a long time. I think probably self-confidence-wise, I was working for other people and I just didn't really want to take that leap. But I always had in the back of my mind, my mom had migraines really bad when I was a kid, and she had acupuncture from an anesthesiologist and it cured her migraines.

And so, I always had that in the back of my mind, “That's really interesting.” And then, finally, I just took the plunge and learned how to do acupuncture. And from there, it's just blown my mind. And I guess I just realized how much I really don't know. There's just so much out there.

So, I'm a certified acupuncturist and I just keep going. I just signed up for the manual manipulation course, so I'm just plugging along. Chinese medicine, I think, is my favorite, but I laser a lot. I pretty much do whatever the animal is telling me they want or will accept treatment modality.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, I love that. I do think that oftentimes it's when we're younger, pre-us, being veterinarians, whatever our exposure was to either thinking outside the box or being open to other modalities oftentimes comes from maybe what our family either said or didn't say or participated in or searched out or didn't. In your situation, the fact that your mama was desperate enough to try something like acupuncture and how wonderful that there was a doctor able to provide that, not only did that literally alter the quality and well-being of her existence, but that had to be quite impactful for you to see. And for you to see it be so effective, that clearly was one of those things that stuck with you and allowed you to remain very open-minded as you transitioned through your journey as a doctor.

Would you say, Peg, that as a conventional practitioner, was it the frustration of the patients that you couldn't treat or did you feel like your toolbox was just not big enough? Or at what point did you decide, “okay, I'm going to learn something else”? Was it early on? Where were you in your frustration level before you're like, “Okay, I got to learn more”?

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

I think it was a combination of things, but mostly that I ran into roadblocks with where I could go treating patients traditionally. You can only use so many drugs and they have so many side effects that they just weren't – and I just knew there had to be something more that I could be doing for them and to help them along. And so that's when I kept telling myself, “Okay, go do this, go learn this.” And finally, I just, “Okay, just do it.” I have not been good about listening to myself just to do it.

And finally, my best friend had formed this house call practice. And I was in Washington practicing at the time. And at that point, I was learning acupuncture and I was going to go off on my own up there. And she's like, “Well, why don't you come here? Because I want to retire and be with my kids so you can take over the practice.” And so, I did and it was really integrative, so I was doing mostly Western medicine and even doing surgeries, which I don't like doing that kind of work as much.

And so finally, just this past year, I finally just transitioned to just being holistic and a referral, more referral practice. I still do integrative for my long-term clients, but that's what I'm doing now to consult and work with their – they have a regular vet and I just do the additional stuff to try to help them have a better quality of life.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And are you doing some house calls or primarily house calls? Talk to me about kind of an average day for you.

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

Yeah, I'm just a solo house call practitioner, and that's what I do. So, I see anywhere from three to six patients, six to seven, that would be a lot in a day driving around, because that's what I mostly do, acupuncture and laser and manual therapy, that kind of thing. So, those appointments usually last a good hour by the time we're talking about what's happening with the pet and maybe the owner. But yeah, I find that most animals are more calm, they're more receptive to therapy being at home, and it's just more relaxing I think for all of us. And I like being out just outside, just being able to be outside in between appointments. Even if it's my car, I have the sunshine and I can breathe a little bit, and I just love it. I really love it. I can't imagine going back to a regular practice.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And what a beautiful gift. One of the things that Fern mentioned when she nominated you was that you were able to come, she was ill and you were able to come and medicate her pets and be with her pets and do the laser. And what an incredible gift. House-call veterinarians. You see literally 75% fewer patients a day, but the time it takes on your part is this is a substantial sacrifice in that you're driving long distances to treat one animal, but that is your sole focus, and you're able to really give them all of your attention. And for the people that are lucky and blessed enough to have a house-call veterinarian like you, it's such a tremendous gift. So, I'm thankful it's as rewarding for you as it is for your patients, and your clients. Like Fern said, this is just a complete gift to your clients and your patients. How far do you drive around your area? What's the farthest you can go before it's too far?

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

Well, I've really limited it now, so I'm able to reach my patients as well as I can. So probably my farthest one is about [a] 35-minute drive without a lot of traffic, but yeah, I used to go a lot farther, but I just can't be able to reach, because I have a lot of regular patients that I see on a weekly to every two-week basis that I have already pre-scheduled out, so it's hard to get too big of a range. So, don't be stuck in traffic kind of a thing, so.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It is. Yeah, it is. And what an amazing gift to your clients and your patients. Just to be able to have you available, come into the home. And the other thing, I've never been a house-call veterinarian. I do in-home euthanasians, but I've never done what you've done. I find it so, you're able to see a whole, see an animal, the animals in a much – you get a clearer picture of the case because you're in their environment and it provides a depth and a breadth to you being a much more effective practitioner than me being in an office, in a clinic. So, it really is amazing all the way around. Peg, what do you love most about the work that you're doing now?

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

I think being able to make a difference in the patient's quality of life. If they're really struggling, if they're really painful, you can help relieve that without them having a lot of bad side effects

from it. And you can work with conjunction with Western meds, but still you can really decrease the dependence on that. And then, just overall they're affecting their quality of life, so they actually feel like they want to get up and move and go for a walk and eating well and all that. And then, also helping the owners, I guess, realize that they're doing, for the older patients that don't have a lot of time left, that they feel like they're doing what they can in a humane, compassionate way and that they just feel like they're doing everything they can for their pet and in a quality way. Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's such a soul-filling, beautiful way as a doctor, as a caregiver, to be able to walk with them down that last chapter, and then be able to help them transition to perform humane euthanasia in the home where the patient's comfortable and not stressed, and the owner doesn't have to pack the animal up and take them somewhere. Just the whole entire experience that you are providing your clients and your patients is beautiful. If you were to tell the world one thing, or if you would want the world to know one thing, thus far in your evolution down your path, what would it be?

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

I guess it would be to just be kind, be understanding and be curious. If you don't like what's happening with your pet's care or you feel like you're not getting the information you need, reach out, look elsewhere, because there's a lot of us out there that do different things that may be helpful for your pet. If you're running into a roadblock, there may be something else out there that can help.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Very, very wise words. And I love the fact that you have worked hard enough at kind of perfecting or working towards gaining professional insights and a place in your professional evolution to the point that you are as happy as you are making your clients and patients feel and be so what a mutually beneficial gift that you're offering your community. For people who might be lucky enough to be in your area or would like to learn more about the work that you're doing, would you let us know how people would be able to find more information out about you?

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

Yeah, probably the best way is our website, which is AtYourBarkAndCall.net. And so-

Dr. Karen Becker:

I love that.

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's a good website.

Well, Dr. Peg, I'm so thankful that Fern took the time to nominate you. It's wonderful for me, it's

very soul-fulfilling for me to be able to connect with my colleagues that are doing such important, meaningful work literally in the homes of the animals that we love so dearly. So, we appreciate all that you're doing and congratulations on your Game Changer Award.

Dr. Peggy LaCombe:

Oh, thank you so much. And thank you for all that you do, too. You're very inspiring.