

Sharing the Importance of Pet Nutrition in Latin America

A Special Interview With Monica Gonzalez Tovar

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and today I have the opportunity to interview a brand-new Game Changer. Monica Tovar has been nominated by Belen as an animal Game Changer and we're so excited to have her join us this morning. So, Monica, congratulations on your Game Changer nomination. We're so excited to spend a few minutes with you this morning, learning more about the awesome work you're doing helping animals be nourished better. So, welcome and thanks for joining us.

Monica Tovar:

No, thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you, Belen, for nominating me. Really. It was a huge surprise and I feel honored to be here, really. So, thank you. Thank you for this space that you have.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So, it has been wonderful for me. This Game Changer platform has fed my soul. Been able to connect with a lot of amazing professionals like you doing really great work. But part of the interest is learning about how you got inspired to do what you're doing. So, for our readers and listeners who don't know who you are, if you'll back up to when – maybe you could walk us through how you learned about the importance of food, and then how you decided to put that into practice, making it your – I don't want to say job, but making it your passionate career that you are – because for most of us, it's not so much a job as we have to do it, and I know that's true with you as well. So, back us up to when you first started thinking about how food really matters.

Monica Tovar:

Yeah. Well, it is a passion, as you say. Indeed, it's like a need to talk about this and to tell people about it. So, the funny thing is, this started with my dog Keller. She's 13 years old now. She's laying right there. And when I got her, she was a little puppy and the first year of her life was miserable. It was diarrhea, vomiting, diarrhea, vomiting all the time. The joints, everything, she was really limping off a front leg, so I thought she had dysplasia. It was a whole thing. So, I kept changing kibble, of course, because – this is funny. I am a vet tech now, but I went to – I'm from Venezuela, originally, and I went to vet school in Venezuela for four years. It's a five-year degree in Venezuela.

Monica Tovar:

So, I did four, then life happened and I had to quit. So, I didn't graduate. So, when I was in vet school, it's funny because I hated nutrition. I hated the subject. If I could, I would skip the classes because I didn't want to learn how to feed a pig to make them fatter earlier so that you can kill it earlier. So, for me, I just hated it, but I loved biochemistry and I love teaching. I discovered that in vet school. I decided that – I had decided that I was going to be a university teacher because I love teaching. So, fast forward and now I have my dog and I'm thinking back and I'm thinking,

"There has to be something about the food, because all this diarrhea." And one day, I was grabbing, I changed kibble to a very famous, very expensive brand, I put my hand in it to grab a – I didn't use a cup. I just used my hand.

Monica Tovar:

When I grabbed it, my hand was so greasy and I thought, "this is not right." So, I decided, "You know what? I'm going to do some research." So, I started doing some research. Thirteen years ago, there was not a lot. I found it a lot in English, of course, and thank God that wasn't a problem for me. I found out about Dr. Billinghurst. I found about his books. I read his books and immediately it was like, "Of course, I mean, of course, how can you – dear Lord, how have I been-" And it's funny because – it's not funny. It's sad. But I started remembering all my dogs in Venezuela-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Monica Tovar:

-and the diseases that they got and I immediately saw it was just the food. If I had known this before. So, of course, I started, as soon as I changed the diet immediately, she changed. Everything changed. She started limping again about two months ago. She's 13. She hadn't limped in 13 years.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Wow.

Monica Tovar:

Yeah. So, I never take her to the vet. She's in beautiful health. It's amazing. So, I had to talk about this and I started talking to my friends and I started, and then I found out that there were some Facebook groups. But in Spanish, people, I don't know in English, but people were really, really mean to other people.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Monica Tovar:

People would ask and people would be like, "Oh no, you have to read 73 files, read the files before you ask any question." So, I thought, "you know what? I'm going to create a Facebook group, but it's called something like Barf for Rookies." And I don't care. You can ask the same question a hundred times because I just make a Word document with all the questions. I just copy and paste and I reply. People need to be comforted and listened to, and we're all afraid to do this change. So, sorry if I'm being too – I'm going too long.

Dr. Karen Becker:

No, it's beautiful and I love that. And I also love that you recognized that even though, as we become educated and as our knowledge as pet parents begins to progress, there's always new pet parents coming in. There's new people coming in saying, "I just heard this for the first time." And they do need to be supported and they do need to be able to ask questions. Even though we're answering the question over and over and over, there's still a brand-new category of people that need that same response and a response that's caring and empathetic and warm and understanding despite the fact that maybe we've answered it 6,000 times. Those new people still need support. So, it's wonderful that you provided that. I can only imagine that your group grew quickly.

Monica Tovar:

Very quickly. Yeah. Very quickly. And, yeah, people were happy that they could that – that they could just ask again.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Monica Tovar:

And I just answer again. That's it.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And so, then what? So, then what was the next step?

Monica Tovar:

So, then the next step I started, I talked to Dr. Billingham. I sent the email and I said, "I want to translate your book." People in Spanish need to learn about from good sources, also, because you could see all sorts of things in Spanish too.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Monica Tovar:

So, I translated his book and then I brought him to Spain also because this is my thing. My passion is teaching, but my passion is really empowering people and helping them overcome these fears because the fears that we have, that vets have, I always tell people, "listen, don't get angry at your vet. Your vet is afraid." He's not mean. They act mean sometimes, and they tell you off, but not because – it's just, he's afraid. He's afraid you're really going to hurt your dog or your cat.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Monica Tovar:

So, I think we need to empower people by explaining, "Of course you can do this." I have a 5-year old boy that when I came home from the hospital with him, I couldn't believe nobody would give me a menu or something, like they will trust me. When he was 6 months, I went to the pediatrician and she's like, "okay, you start with solids." And I'm like, "okay, give me a thing." And she's like, "Oh, Monica, come on. Common sense. Start with veggies and this and that." And it's like, okay, they let you do that with a baby human, human baby, and we have that.

Monica Tovar:

We need to learn a few things because of course they've been erased from our brains by this marketing and these corporations, but once you learn these few things, it's not that difficult. And I think we need to help people get there because then once they know that, they fall in love with nutrition. It's incredible the amount of people that they they've done one of my courses or they watch my YouTube videos and they say, "Now I love nutrition. I want to learn more. I want to do it." So that's, I think that's beautiful.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Not only is it beautiful, from my perspective, what you've done is you remove the fear from food.

Monica Tovar:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And I think sometimes people just need to be – they're so afraid. You hit the nail on the head. Veterinarians are frightened that their clients could be erroneously going down a path that could inadvertently harm their animal. And rather than risk the animal being harmed, vets just say, "no, don't do it," which perpetuates more fear. And what you've done is you are helping people who have a desire to use food as medicine. You're removing the fear by coaching them through the easy steps, but with guidance and support and empathy and patience. You're guiding them through the process of doing it in a way that allows them to not have fear. And it's really important. So, talk to me then, a little bit about how you started consulting with pet parents. Probably just need. I'm assuming people called and said, "Oh my gosh, can you help me?" And that was a natural unfolding?

Monica Tovar:

Yeah, yeah. It was completely natural. I started, after the Facebook group, I created my blog and then I started posting articles and everything, and then I decided, I thought, "You know what? I'm going to just do a basic course," because with everything I teach, I think, again, I'm sorry if I repeat myself, but if you understand the basics, then you can get it as complicated as you want. Everybody has a lifestyle. Everybody has complications. Everybody has a lot of things that some people cannot, do not have the time or the space to get there, so "Buy prepared food, buy a good brand, or do this." But once I started with this basic course, I thought I'm going to do a very short course, very basic so people can start. And then they started, of course, they saw the blog and they started asking me, and then I started consulting with them.

Monica Tovar:

And it's beautiful, all the responses. It's like-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Monica Tovar:

-the change is incredible. Especially, of course, you get the difficult cases, like a lot of gut problems, a lot of intolerances and all those things, but it's amazing how some of them, not all of them, of course, but some of them can be resolved so quickly. I was talking to a man that called me once and he's like, "this puppy, 6 months and never a solid stool." And so, I always say to people, I say, "listen, I'm going to walk you through. We're going to do this. It could be resolved in a week and it could be resolved in six months or in a year. It's going to depend on your pet's body, on a lot of factors that you can't predict."

Monica Tovar:

And the guy is like, "Oh no, don't tell me that." And I'm like, "Well, I just ask you to be patient because we need to start and then we'll see." The next day, it was incredible. The next day we started with bone broth and a protocol that I have, and the next day the guy's like, "listen, I don't want to get excited. First solid poop my dog has dumped today." And I'm like, "Well, that's great. Let's not be too overexcited. It might go back. Don't worry. Let's keep going." Never again. The dog was like that the next day. And yes, of course, that can happen and you're like, "Oh yeah, that's great." It's not me. It's the dog's body that reacted in that way. But yeah, it was, it was sort of like – yeah. It followed the blog and the YouTube videos and all that. Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's wonderful. So, it is those kinds of cases when you get that instantaneous improvement, of course, they feed our soul. One of the things that I tell my clients is I can't predict when your dog or cat is going to respond. However, we have to nourish them, so we might as well be nourishing them in a way that restores and rebuilds their gut biome, that we're focusing on detoxifying the body. We might as well start in knowing it may take a week, a month, a year. It's better than what you were doing that was not doing anything. And most people understand that. But I tell you what, when you get those instantaneous improvements, you're like, "Oh, thank you for a body that can respond so quickly."

Monica Tovar:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Because the body's ability to heal, of course, is what dictates that timeframe. It's not us as [crosstalk 00:13:05].

Monica Tovar:

Yeah, it's not us.

Dr. Karen Becker:

-obsessed with nutrition.

Monica Tovar:

Yeah.

Dr. Karen Becker:

The other blessing is that you're bilingual. That helps immensely. So, talk to me a little bit about – the barometer in Canada and the U.S. is that people are much more interested in fresher foods, partly because the younger generation is recognizing, common sense is kicking in and the younger generation, the next generation, the next two generations are recognizing, “You know what? I know that I shouldn't be eating ultra-processed fast food all the time for me or my child. This makes sense that I wouldn't do this. A little bit of ultra-processed food, fine. We all eat some fast food. But a lifetime of fast food, I don't know. I think my dog or cat needs more.”

Dr. Karen Becker:

And so, veterinarian that have been preaching, or wellness consultants that have been preaching improving animals' diets are finally at a place where we're seeing hard work come to fruition because common sense is kicking in. And the arguments are far fewer with veterinarians because veterinarians are recognizing they're going to have to accept this or they're going to lose 20% of their clientele, 30% of their clientele. So, by default, vets are like, "darn it. Okay. I'll accept a homemade diet."

Monica Tovar:

Tell me about it.

Dr. Karen Becker:

[crosstalk 00:14:30] as a client. Yeah. Are you seeing that? Are you seeing that with the people that you're working with as well?

Monica Tovar:

Yeah. Well, I work with people in Spain and with a lot of people in Latin America, too. And I can tell you at the veterinary level is Latin America that's amazing. I have a lot of vets doing my courses and they know that I'm officially a vet tech, that I'm not a vet, and they take my course. They're like, "I want to take your course." They have this mind, they have an open mind, and they're really like, "Yes. Common sense. Yes, of course." Here it's a little – in Spain, it's more the guardians. It's more the guardians. And it's funny because most of my clients and most of the people that do my courses or everything are between 30 and up. It's not very young people. It's people-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Interesting.

Monica Tovar:

Yes.

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's great.

Monica Tovar:

It's interesting. But in Latin America, yeah. Here there are vets, of course, that are starting, but it's not a lot. It's still, I think, still there's a lot of work here to do.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And so, if people wanted to learn more about, people are listening and hearing this and thinking, "Oh my gosh, I want to take the course," where do they go to learn more?

Monica Tovar:

Well, I have a website that is my whole name. I'm sorry, because it's long. Sorry. Long and in Spanish. So, it's MonicaGonzalezTovar, all together, .com. And then there, they have the blog. Then they have the shop where they can look at my courses. Then I also have a membership that I started a couple of months ago also to keep like – I tell people, we can still – I'm learning all the time, all the time and I love to study. So, I'm all the time reading new things. So even saying things, "Listen, two years ago, I said, blah, blah, blah, blah. And now I've read and now I've studied, and I'm going to change. Let me tell you this."

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Yeah. Beautiful.

Monica Tovar:

So it happened with Steve Brown, with the fat and puppies. It's this thing about cognitive development. And I was like, I kept saying, "don't be obsessed with taking all the fat," because people would take all the fat off of the food. And I'm like, "no, don't do it. They need fat. They need." And then I heard Steve Brown talking about puppies and everything. So, I keep – that's the idea, that you can keep teaching people and telling them what's going on.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, it's wonderful. And I think all of us in the fresh-feeding community, we're all perpetual learners and the more that we learn, the more that we say, "okay, I'm changing my thought and I'm tweaking this and what I said last year, I can update now because we know more," and we're all in the process of learning more and being better stewards, better at knowledge transfer, better at being able to be a better resource, which is wonderful, I think. And a really important aspect of this is a brand of fresh feeding, despite the fact that it's ancient and evolutionary and what animals have done innately, we are still trying to make sure that we're providing the best information, which requires this ongoing learning, which is part of the exciting piece of partnering with pet parents who also are equally as excited. So, I'm sure that it doesn't feel like

work to you, but when you get up in the morning, Monica, what do you love most about this fantastic work that you're doing?

Monica Tovar:

Oh, to be honest, what I love most is working with fears and taking them away. I talk a lot about what the marketing of the big companies has done to us and I tried to explain to people, this is why you think this, this is why you ask people on the street, "What does a dog eat?" And they say, "Kibble." It's horrible and it's been so bad. So, I just think we need to get to that layer and say to people, "You know what? Really, no." So, I love to take complex subjects and turn them into simple information. I love to do that. That really – it's really funny because one of my videos on YouTube is really bad. It's the first. I was pregnant. It was horrible.

Monica Tovar:

The sound is horrible. Everything is bad about that video, right? People sometimes put like, "Oh, the sound is horrible." Of course. I did it five years ago. I was pregnant. But I'm explaining the percentages, how to calculate, because I realized when I was talking to people and saying 2%, 2%, 20% of the 2%, people are like, "wow." And I thought, you know what? I'm going to do it with a board. And I just-

Dr. Karen Becker:

So good.

Monica Tovar:

And it has 200,000 whatever, because people need it. So, I love that. I love, even though I know sometimes it's very simple stuff, but I think people need it. And that fills me. That fills my heart.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Well, it's beautiful and it should fill your heart, but you're also providing a tremendous – you're filling in the gaps for people that have big question marks. You're reducing their questions, you're easing their fears, and you're making the information accessible, but also doable. They can take your information and say, "you know what? I can do this." And that's really, you're empowering them. And that's really important. So, if you, Monica, would want the world to know one thing about all the magnificent work that, everything you've learned so far, if you could let the world know one thing, what would it be?

Monica Tovar:

It's something funny that I say many times, and it's, "You can be a superhero," okay? You can be your dog's or your cat's superhero. We have this amazing power. We have the power over everything about them. We decide when they go out, how long, where to, when do they eat, what do they eat, where do they sleep, when do they pee and poo. Everything is in our hands, and that is a big responsibility. So, I think one of the things that is the easiest, and it has a tremendous, enormous importance, is diet. And it's the easiest because I understand that if you have a 9-to-7 job, there's going to be only certain times where you can take your dog out, so that is going to be difficult to change. Or there are certain things that are more difficult.

Monica Tovar:

But diet is one of the ones that if I help you make it easy, if I help you organize it so that it's simple and it's easy, then you can have this tremendous effect, beautiful, amazing effect on your dog's or your cat's health. And I think that power and that – I don't know. We can do so many things, so many things. Like self-selection, for example, is such a little nugget of freedom we give them, and then it fills them in such a way. By the way, I learned that from Dr. Isla Fishburn, and we should nominate her for this.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes.

Monica Tovar:

Can I nominate her?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yes, yes. Do that because it's very true. So, just simple choices, allowing our animals to have choices, is something that I think we don't necessarily think about. And yes, that's exactly – those are those little pearls of giving animals freedoms, including freedom of what veggie they might want to nibble on or what snack they prefer, what protein source they're interested in. That seems like little things, and yet makes a huge difference for that animal's quality of life, stress level, your relationship. A bunch of things improve when animals are given choice. So, that's a great example. I love that Belen took the time to nominate you and I love that you have put your heart and soul into providing resources for people that have a lot of questions and probably a lot of fears, and don't know where to start. You've made it easy and accessible to start the process of nourishing pets better. And I love the fact that you have put so much time and effort into building a platform that helps people do that.

Monica Tovar:

Thank you. Thank you very much. Really, I'm just honored and grateful to Belen and to you for doing this and to you for your work, really. You're an inspiration, of course, and I'm just really grateful to be able to do what I'm doing.