

# **A Labor of Love to Help Stop the Cycle of Pet Overpopulation**

## **A Special Interview With Michelle Lewis**

**By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Hi, I am Dr. Karen Becker, and Maryann has nominated Michelle Lewis for a Game Changer Award, and Michelle is joining us now to talk more about the amazing rescue that she's involved with. So, thank you, Michelle, for joining us, and congratulations on your Game Changer Award.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Thank you so much. I am very honored to receive that.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Aww. And it's just beautiful that Maryann has taken the time to nominate you. I'm so excited to learn more. I had not heard of your organization before, and I did look you up online and you're doing amazing work. But for listeners and readers that aren't familiar with what you do, why don't you back up and walk us through how you came to be doing all that you're doing.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Okay. I've been in animal rescue for over 10 years. I helped another nonprofit that was locally in this town when they disbanded in 2019. Staci Sleeper Colby, who is in Massachusetts, and myself formed LaMa Animal Rescue and Support Services, hence the L-A-M-A, that's Louisiana [and] Massachusetts. One of our main focuses is spay and neuter. We have partnered with other rescues in Northeast states, Maine, Massachusetts and Washington D.C., and we have transported – Last month, I think we transported over 200 animals to be adopted.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Wow. Wow.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Just last month, yes. And if someone is giving away free puppies in the Walmart parking lot, Tractor Supply, we usually try to go snatch them up. And then we offer a free spay to the mother, and we've actually arranged transport and go pick them up ourselves because we are a very poor parish. And we also spay and neuter everything on the premises, because we have a feeling like, "We're not coming back to this situation."

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

That's right, that's right.

**Michelle Lewis:**

"We're going to take care of it right here, right now."

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

It's beautiful. So, I have a bunch of questions. First of all, how did you get paired – It makes total sense that, where your environment is, you have an excessive number of dogs that need homes, and then Northeast is in a situation where many people are ready and willing to provide a home, but there maybe aren't [enough] volume of dogs. So, it's a really beautiful connection. But how did you end up meeting your partner in the Northeast?

**Michelle Lewis:**

Staci and I met with the original rescue that we both were helping, Lumberjack Rescue, here in town, that disbanded in 2019. So, we just kept getting requests after they closed, and she and I talked and said, "You know what? Let's just give it a try." And here we are, several years later.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

It's wonderful. It's a tremendous amount of work, I know, Michelle. It's just-

**Michelle Lewis:**

It is, it is. And all of our volunteers all have full-time jobs. We're foster-based, which means we do not have the facility, and we foster these animals in our homes and prepare them for their forever home. And it's hard.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

It's very hard. But what's so beautiful about this story is that in the environment that you're in, there are amazing people stepping up. There are amazing people everywhere if you go looking. And you have knit together this community of beautiful volunteers and foster homes that not only believe in the mission, but wholeheartedly are helping you accomplish it, which is really wonderful. About how many foster homes do you have, Michelle?

**Michelle Lewis:**

We have about 20 fosters.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Nice.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Not all are active at the same time, but we have probably 10 that are active around the clock.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

I bet. I bet.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yeah. So, we're always looking for new fosters.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Okay, that's good. And actually, on that subject, why don't you give a shout-out, if people wanted to learn more right now, where would they go to either to get involved or learn more? What's your website or social media?

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yeah, we have a website and it's LaMaAnimalRescue.org. You can find the information there. You can also email us at lamaanimalrescue@gmail.com. We have volunteers that check these daily, so we're also on Facebook.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Wonderful.

**Michelle Lewis:**

And we're actually having a fundraiser tonight. One of our biggest obstacles is the high cost of veterinary medicine.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Of course, of course.

**Michelle Lewis:**

And each state has certain requirements to cross the state lines. So, each animal that we help has to meet their requirements as well. Right now, we have a very large vet bill, so we're having another fundraiser tonight.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Good for you. Good for you. How often are you making transport trips? Every month, would you say you're taking a carload of dogs?

**Michelle Lewis:**

There is a transport company, there are two, that we use, and they come and we run on a weekly schedule.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Wow. Wonderful.

**Michelle Lewis:**

But in November and December, it'll be every two weeks.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Okay, wonderful. Well, what-

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yeah, yeah. And I actually was able to travel to Maine and Massachusetts in the spring with one of our board members, and we visited everyone and we met some really nice people. And really, we're more reassured of the success of this partnership.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Well, and that's wonderful that you're able to see – You know your environment well. It's really wonderful that you're able to see the end result, and also be able to see the joy of – You know these animals are going to a future and a forever home.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Oh, yes, yes, yes.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

But being able to see, that's pretty magical.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes, yes. And we do get updates from adopters. They send pictures and we try to post on our social media. The happy-ever-after helps the fruit of our labor and puts a warm spot in our fosters' hearts to know these things.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And rightfully so. In fact, most of these animals go from having a horrible, bleak, abusive, bad future to-

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes, ma'am.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

-some of them probably have won the dog heaven lotto, the homes that they've gone into, which is so marvelous.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes. We have several that live on Cape Cod.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, exactly. Just marvelous. Beautiful. So, out of all this that has to be – I'll let you answer the question. You're doing a lot of things and, of course, this is a labor of love, but what do you love most, Michelle, about the work that you're doing?

**Michelle Lewis:**

What I love the most is the ever after, the final. The final, the homes. They have their own house, their own children to play with, their own couch to sleep on. They have their own home, because

the conditions here that we help these dogs and cats from are pretty horrific at times. And they would have been euthanized if we had not stepped in and said, "Hey, we'll help them."

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, yeah, and then you're [inaudible 00:07:45]-

**Michelle Lewis:**

We mainly pull from stray holds. Here, we have a local stray hold. It's a very small town, and basically, just word-of-mouth, people come to my job with a car full of puppies. So, it's never-ending, 24/7.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, I believe that. And at least the people in your community are beginning to recognize that you are providing a safe haven and a resource for these animals so that they're not doing horrific things in a backfield, that they're aware that you are there for them. In general, has your community response locally been positive, Michelle?

**Michelle Lewis:**

Oh, yes. Yes, it has. We also have a vaccine clinic that we do once a month. We wrote a grant to Petco Love, and they provided us with the free vaccine. So, we do that in the community. And it took a while for the community to realize the level that we're doing and understanding our work. And we are starting getting more volunteers for fundraisers and people are fostering or, "Hey, can I go sit out at the vet during an appointment?" Or we have dogs in boarding because we simply do not have enough fosters right now, and they'll go and walk and interact. And so, the word's getting out.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes. And you're coordinating a lot of moving pieces yourself.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes, yes, yes.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

There's a lot happening.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes, yes.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

So obviously you're doing this because there's a massive need in your community. And to be honest, no one else was. So, you're doing it, and it's marvelous and amazing. Out of this, Michelle, if you could let the world not living in rural Louisiana know one thing, or if you could share one message with the world, what would it be?

**Michelle Lewis:**

The importance of spay and neutering and heartworm preventative. These are things that are just a must, and this needs to be nationwide, something that is recognized and addressed. It's just – I hurt for the ones that we can't help, but I celebrate for the ones that we do.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes, yes. Exactly. And that's what you have to focus on, is despite the fact that you will not save every creature in your area, you are doing a magnificent service to the animals that you are honoring and caring for. And you're doing the best you can. You're doing hard work with few hands, but the dent that you're making is really wonderful.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes, I would like the world to follow us on Facebook, check out our website, help sponsor. Any little thing helps. Any little thing helps. Sharing, following, donating, volunteering — anything is needed.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

It's a beautiful thing that you've started in a desperate community that didn't have resources.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes, ma'am.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And look at all the lives that you saved. It has to be-

**Michelle Lewis:**

I know.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

-a lot of heartbreak, but girl, a whole lot of reasons to celebrate.

**Michelle Lewis:**

It is. Yes. When we went to Massachusetts in the spring, we attended a reunion event. This one rescue that we send to once a year puts on this big event, and I probably saw at least 30 of the dogs that we have sent over the years came to see me. It was so rewarding.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

That had to be the best reunion ever.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes, yes. And I promise, they recognized me too.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, yeah. But I bet you – the transformation when animals go from no love, no veterinary care, poor food and a not trustworthy environment, to being in a safe environment with good food and love and medical care, it can be – Sometimes I have not recognized those transformations because they're totally different animals. They're vibrant and healthy, and they put weight on, and their coat is shiny, and their eyes are bright.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Right, yes.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

It's amazing.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes. And they do look into your eyes and touch your soul. They do.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

They do. And that is the reason, my friend, that you'll continue doing what you do. As hard as it is, you're making a powerful impact in your community. I'm so thankful, Michelle, that Maryann nominated you for your Game Changer Award. Much deserved. And we're so grateful that you took a little bit of time to tell us about the great work that you're doing.

**Michelle Lewis:**

I'm sorry it's rainy here today and we all look horrible.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Oh, listen, you're working hard and-

**Michelle Lewis:**

Yes, yes.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes, you are. You are. Well done, my friend, and a much-deserved Game Changer Award, and I'm thankful that I was able to meet you.

**Michelle Lewis:**

Oh, well, thank you. And it was nice to meet you too.