

# **Rising Above Disabilities to Champion Uniqueness and Inspire Positivity**

## **A Special Interview With Dr. Melissa Shapiro**

**By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker, and I'm very thankful that Janet has nominated Dr. Melissa Shapiro for a Game Changer Award. And Dr. Melissa is joining us today to take a little bit of time to talk about how and why she started this amazing platform. So first of all, congratulations on your Game Changer Award, and thank you for taking some time to talk with me today.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

Well, thank you for having me. I love to talk about my platform and my work.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Wonderful. So I was able to visit your website and I'm so excited for you to share with our listeners, readers, viewers a little bit more. You're a veterinarian. You've been a vet for a long time, but clearly your veterinary work has taken on different facets, and you're doing a lot of amazing things when it comes to connecting kids and families with animals at this point. So, why don't you back up and walk us through how this came about.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

Okay. Well, I am a veterinarian, as you mentioned. I'm one of those that always wanted to be a vet from the time I was very, very young. That was my only goal in life, and I feel very fortunate to have achieved that goal because being a veterinarian, as you know, it's a job and it's also a lifestyle. And I really have had a very nice career. I feel very fortunate to have been a house call vet in Lower Fairfield County, Connecticut, for decades. I've had a great client base. A really, really amazing veterinary hospital as a base. So, I've been able to really practice good medicine without the worry of financial limitations that many have in other parts of the country.

That said, I've also always been very partial towards disabled, special needs dogs and cats, and primarily dogs because I am allergic to cats. So, I've never had my own, but I take care of them. So, I grew up with a blind dog. My vet school dog, who I adopted after meeting her in a research lab, was made diabetic. And that dog stayed with me for many, many years after graduation. I gave her shots twice a day. I would call her "very special needs," but definitely an ambassador, at least for me to learn and to accept that we're going to have animals with a variety of issues that we just deal with and move on.

So, after vet school, I met my husband. We got married. We had April, the diabetic dog, and then we had Jamie. And then, just time went on, and I worked, and I took care of animals in their houses, and eventually, we actually had a Border Collie who was deaf. Never really thought much about the disability part of her, and I had a little house sparrow who was also very

disabled. So, I was very partial to that area of medicine and caring for animals. But when our kids started going to college, they all left, three of them left over a few years, and we started adding dogs.

I had been really into dog rescue and advocating for animals, animal welfare issues, for my whole life. And we started adopting dogs. So, we ended up, long story [short], six dogs were here, last kid was still here but leaving for college, he had just gotten accepted into college. And I got an email from a friend of mine who's a vet down in Georgia, who our family adopted a dog from six years before. That is Piglet playing with the toy. And she sent me a note and said, "I have a little 1-pound blind and probably deaf puppy who will be a special placement. Do you know someone who would be a good fit for him?"

And my initial gut was, "No. There's no one up here who wants a dog like that where I live, and I don't want another dog." Because we had so many dogs. We had a two-dog max, and we were already up to six. We had fostered some and given them away. So, I said we would foster him. Very quickly, I realized I had to do something. I wasn't going to not do anything for her. So, a few days later, Piglet came up, and Piglet is a tiny – He's currently 6 1/2 pounds. Obviously, we still have him. He is the star of my social media platform and my life at this point. And my career, which was taking care of animals like this, led into the adoption of Piglet after two months of great stress, because Piglet was not an easy puppy.

I said, "How much trouble could a 1-pound puppy be?" And the truth was that Piglet was a lot of trouble because he screamed all the time. He was very upset, very anxious. He is deaf and blind, and I had never had a dog like that. But in short order, he sort of integrated into the house. He knew his routine, he knew when we're going to go get up, go out, eat, go to work. And he had friends at the vet hospital, and he really settled down to a very comfortable, happy life with us. I taught him tap signals. I have a lot of friends across the country who have rescue organizations that cater to and focus on disabled dogs, in particular, at that point, deaf and blind ones.

So, I made a Facebook page to get rid of him, and the Facebook page grew and ultimately was his Facebook page, which is called Piglet, the Deaf, Blind, Pink Puppy. And as it grew, teachers and the general population were finding him to be inspiring to them to get out of bed in the morning if they happen to have an illness or an injury or a family problem or whatever their issues were, because he's a very positive dog and he faces the challenges in a positive way. And that was his sort of motto. And a teacher in Massachusetts saw him and left a message saying that she couldn't wait to show her students Piglet's videos. And she meant because she was going to use him as a growth mindset teaching model.

And just to backtrack for a second, I thought when I kept him, that I made a promise that he would have a productive, meaningful life. And that, for me, meant that he was going to be an ambassador for disabled animals, pets, to raise money to send to rescues that focused on disabled pets. So that was my – I was already selling merchandise. My first merchandise were these phone case wallets. I sold hundreds and hundreds of them. I sent them all around the world and sent the money down to Piglet's Rescue in Georgia.

So that's how we started. We moved into other things. So, I was doing that with him and then advocating, of course, on his pages. But when the teacher, whose name was Tricia [inaudible

00:07:15] up in Plainville, Massachusetts, sent me that comment, I was reading all of my comments at that point on all the Facebook page, and I answered her and said I would make her a video, which I couldn't, because I didn't know how to make videos then, but I made a PowerPoint, The Story of Piglet, the Deaf, Blind, Pink Puppy. Her kids loved it. Over the years, she created a program that is called Piglet Mindset, and that was to teach growth mindset to kids using Piglet and our other dogs as the model. The teaching model, of course, using animals to engage kids is a prime way to teach, of course, and it's very effective.

So, we ended up creating this program. I create all the materials. She thought of it, so I give her most of the credit. But in any case, long story into very short, the program has grown and grown. I have PowerPoints on the website, which is called pigletmindset.org, that teachers can download for free. They incorporate it as a supplement and resource into their ongoing SEL (social and emotional learning) and inclusion curriculum. Two years after we started, a teacher in Alabama said she wanted to use him to teach inclusion. So, we created Piglet's Inclusion Pack from our other six dogs, and that's how it started and that's how it continues.

I've added to the program. I revised the program this summer so that it's a little bit more aligned with the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework, which has also – there are focus questions, discussion questions, and then writing prompts embedded into each PowerPoint. So, all of that. Piglet got a Dodo video. He became very popular online. That first Dodo video had 13 million views, and then everything just took off. And in 2019, we were in People Magazine. I got a book deal to write about Piglet, and here's the book. This is the memoir, and then this is the kids' book.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And where can people go to buy those, Melissa?

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

These are available everywhere. They're published by Simon & Schuster. So, they're in all bookstores, they're on Amazon and wherever books are sold. So, I have those. And then we just continue on and my program grows. We have, as I said, the online program, but then also we make school visits, so either in person or virtual, depending on where people are located. We're hoping to do a tour in California and maybe across the country in the spring. Not sure. Still working on the outline to start with.

And then nicely or not, Susie, our old dog, the picture on the back of the book is of our dogs. This was the original Piglet and his Inclusion Pack. So, little Susie died a couple of years ago. She was very old and his very good friend. A year and a half ago, we added Lucy, who is down on the floor playing with Piglet right now, who has a broken foot, a non-union fracture. So, she has to wear a brace. So, she's a disabled dog who was a stray dog for over a year that they finally were able to catch her when she was hit and broke both back feet. One healed and the other didn't. So, we were up to seven again. And then in January-

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Hiya, honey!

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

This is Georgie, and Georgie-

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Hey, Georgie.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

- came to us because I have Piglet. I have Piglet, so everyone wanted me to have Georgie, too, because he was in Connecticut. Someone put him on a sidewalk and left him in a box on a sidewalk on December 30th, almost a year ago. And he's deaf and blind, like Piglet, and he is awesome. They're completely different personalities. I'm just looking for Piglet.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

Come here, buddy. So, you can see the difference between them. This is Piglet.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Hiya, honey. Yes.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

And this is Georgie. And Georgie's a tiny bit bigger. They both have the same disability and a completely different approach. They're both very positive, but Piggy is very detail-oriented. Georgie is a wild man.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And are they good friends, Melissa?

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

They are not good friends, which is unfortunate for our platform, but a great lesson for everybody to speak it.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes, yes.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

They are fine with each other as long as Georgie doesn't put his face in Piglet's nose. But the problem with the two of them, is that this one is very wild, and he bangs into him if they're playing. And Piglet doesn't like that because he can't see. It's too surprising for him.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Of course. Scary.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

He's a little more structured. So then he could take a little puppy like this. But Piglet is very accepting and he is very flexible, and that is part of his lesson. And so over time, he's adjusted. They sit next to each other, they do their tricks together, they travel together, and they are very – There's an agreement that they get along fine, but they don't play together. And I wouldn't call them buddies, but they each have buddies within our group, and everybody's good.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And that's a beautiful lesson to teach kids as well, that, "Listen, you're not going to resonate with everyone in your world. You're just not. We can still be kind. We can hang out. We don't have to be besties, but we can be kind and respectful to one another." So there's a lesson there, too.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

Yeah, I mean, my son said, "You have to have Georgie because he's going to be a great part of your program." And I wasn't sure what it would look like, and I certainly did not adopt Georgie because I needed him in my program, because we have plenty of dogs. But as it turns out, Georgie, he is much more laid back about things. He's a power walker. He brings things to his bed. But his whole learning style is so much different than Piglet's, who was very systematic in everything that he learned. And he did it. He built, and he still does, every day he does something new and different even at 6 1/2 years old.

This one, Georgie, he just learns. He's more of a wide, big picture kind of dog. And he learns all the same things, but in a much, much different timeframe and fashion. So, I do have a Piglet versus Georgie talk that I can give that really contrasts and compares to dogs with the same exact disabilities. They literally are deaf and blind in the same exact way. They can see when the lights go on and off, but they don't track or focus on anything. And just the different breed mixes also, you can see very discreet – Not discreet, [but] very definitive differences. Very obvious differences between the two dogs.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And there again, amazing lessons, right? Amazing lessons, which is just wonderful. And so, I just have to ask, six and a half years ago, you probably of course had no idea that this is the beautiful direction your life was going in.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

I know.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Right?

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

I was looking for what was going to happen to my career because I can't climb around or crawl around on the floor anymore. And you get to a certain age where it's just time to phase it out over time. I'm not in a hurry not to be a vet. I enjoy being a vet, and I still am a vet, but I was looking for some other place to use my veterinary background. And this is an ideal place because I am able to get on my platforms on Facebook and Instagram and teach. I do a lot of educational posts. I give webinars once a month because we have a nonprofit, which is called Piglet International Inc. that supports the program. We also donate at least \$500 a week to a dog rescue, again, that focuses on disabled dogs. But in the past few weeks, I've given thousands of dollars because of the hoarding case in Arizona.

So, I've given a lot of money to the rescue groups that are taking those dogs and helping to rehabilitate them and place them. So, I have that also as a piece of our nonprofit, and then in the nonprofit also, we donate the kids book to schools as Piglet's book donation program, which is part of our education program, which is called, as I said, Piglet Mindset. So, I have all of that, and I'm able to teach kids as well about being kind to animals, caring for animals, about rescue, which is really my big passion of how all this started. And I am really delighted to be able to go into a school, talk about my rescued dogs and how they are positive and have [a] growth mindset, and they're inclusive and kind. That is the lesson that these dogs have. I show them videos.

I have one video of Piglet at the Special Canine Games in Ohio where he was learning to do the A-frame. So, he goes up and down. I was luring him with food, and of course I was holding his harness because he's 6 1/2 pounds. If he fell off, obviously, that'd be tragic. But I held his harness and I had to coax him up and down because he was a little bit nervous. He wasn't sure where he was going. And then he started barking, and after a little while, he just kept barking, barking, and I didn't know what he wanted. I took him out. I took him food. He kept barking. He wanted to go back on the A-frame, and he did it over and over and over. And after a few times of practicing, because that is what he's like, he did it with the tunnels also at this huge agility place with lots of tunnels, and he learned to go through the tunnels by using his nose.

I would crawl to him breathing into the tunnel, blowing in, and then he would find me. But the A-frame – so I have one video of him, coaxing him, and then the next one of him going up and down very smoothly, showing how, with his limitations, he does the best that he can, which is pretty good. And he really enjoyed it. It's one of the best pair of videos that I have that I show to the kids. And I reserve that for when I do my presentations. It's not on the online program, but I have just things like that to see the dogs and to learn from them. It's really a very effective and fun way for kids to learn, and they remember it years later.

There's a little girl in Rhode Island who's in fifth grade now, and she learned about Piglet when she was in second grade, and she brought Piglet Mindset into her travel soccer team. So, she was talking to the kids about having a Piglet Mindset, which is being positive and, like I said, having a growth mindset, which is being flexible, perseverant, resilient, empathetic, and kind and optimistic. So, I sent them stickers and pens so that they would all have these little treasures from Piglet and thanking her for bringing that to her friends because it is a really nice way for kids to team up and be positive.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. And really, just animals are able to educate in a way that humans can't. And the fact that you've got kids recognizing, "Hey – " First of all, he's adorable, but the fact that they're able to knit together, "This is a special needs animal, and look at how positive and kind and inclusive and supportive and outgoing." The fact that he could conquer an A-frame. There's a lot of lessons that animals can teach in the most effective way, much more so than us. But you are certainly facilitating all of this. So, I have to ask, when you get up in the morning, what do you love most about what you're doing?

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

Well, first of all, I love these dogs. Okay? They are great teaching models. They're fun on Instagram and on social media. I love that we were in People Magazine and that we got on NBC Nightly News, and we have videos and all sorts of interviews for over all of these years and books and all that. But I actually really love the dogs.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

So when I wake up, even though I've had him for six and a half years and Georgie since January, and my other dogs as well, when I look at them, I still really sit back and smile. Sometimes I even cry because I can't believe that I almost said no. I almost gave them away, both of them, and the other dogs as well. So, when I wake up in the morning, I am really thankful that I said yes, that I told my husband, "I'm really sorry," and that I'm able to use these dogs to give them a really, really unique purpose in life. They can't take hikes. They can't run free on the beach. They really can't. First of all, they're tiny, and second, they can't see and hear, and it would be

dangerous. But they do things that other dogs don't do. They reach people with their message and their awesomeness.

And it's not that they are disabled that we're all gawking at them and saying, "Wow, Piglet can run up the stairs and come into the house," because there are countless deaf and blind animals, dogs, cats, horses and people that can accomplish things. But their attitude is so just inspiring and it's addictive, really, that I once was asked, am I inspired by Piglet? And I said, "No." And then I've really thought about it and I thought, "Yes, I really am inspired by what he does." Because his inspiration is what allows me and motivates me to do all of this work. So, I am thankful to him, and I'm very thankful, of course, to the person who rescued him down in Georgia and who found me and said, "Do you know anyone who's going to be a good fit?" It was not going to be me. And the same with this one. "You have Piglet. Do you want another one?" I said, "No."

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Right. And what's so awesome is that you didn't plan any of this. You certainly weren't planning on – I don't want to say foster failure, but you weren't planning. And yet the rich benefits and blessings and connection that you've been able to provide through your pack of dogs is helping people understand animals, but also their relationships with other humans at a much deeper, more meaningful level. It's really wonderful. So if you could tell the world one thing – There are lots of things your dogs are teaching humanity, but if you could share one thing with the world, what would it be?

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

I say this all the time and people say, "Oh, it's not so profound." But truly, I feel like – the little sentence that I have is, "Why say no when you can say yes?"

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

Because I really feel like people should go with their gut, even when your gut is telling you to do the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, because look what I could have missed out on.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

It was an amazing decision. So, I want to write a book, another book about decisions and the impact that making a simple decision to keep a deaf and blind dog, and then another one, but the first one for sure, how that changed my whole life. It changed the trajectory of my career as well



as my whole life. And even my kids, especially one who's here right now visiting, she said, "Get off of Facebook and get rid of that dog. Find him his forever home." She even has folded, and she is very, very supportive of our whole program.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

I love that. And I love that you honored your intuition and your gut. There's new science talking about gut microbiome and how gut-brain axis [works], that we're wired with those innate ancient feelings, knowings, deep knowings for a reason. And if we were to pay better attention to them, as you've done, outcomes are better. And you firsthand experienced that. So, it's really beautiful, this unexpected shift in the path of your life and your passion, but also, really, your mission all brought about from-

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

It just all followed through. I have one theme in life, and it's really pretty amazing because I used to go to schools to teach kids about being a vet. I've been making school visits since before I had kids, and even was married. But I think that one thing that I did learn, though I struggled when I got Piglet for two months, I really tortured myself about keeping him or not. It was really, really distressing, the thought of giving him away and the thought of keeping him, because I just felt like it was crazy to have a seventh dog of any dog, let alone this one.

But at the same time, we really were very committed to him. And after two months, the rescue group had a zillion people applying. They were all lying. It was crazy that some of the people that really thought that they would be able to take care of him with the way that they described, and they were finally going to give him to somebody. That's another story. But I realized at that very moment, I called them back and I said, "No. I'm keeping him." I told Warren. But what I learned was that when Georgie came, I wasn't going to do that to myself again.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. Good, good.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

And so, one of my friends told me – because I was most worried about Piglet and how he would feel about having this dog, and I didn't want to disturb him, just his whole being. He is profoundly disabled. And while he is flexible, that's part of his lesson, and resilient, he also has feelings, and I didn't want to aggravate him with a puppy banging into him.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Of course, of course. Of course.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

So, a friend of mine in Oklahoma and the woman who had him in her rescue both said to me, “Go three weeks. Do not think about keeping him or not keeping or anything to do with adopting him or not. And then at the end of three weeks, just make a decision.” So I went three weeks, and I realized as I was going that I was not stressed out by having this dog here. And while Piglet was kind of-

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Adjusting, right.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

-he was grumpy at times, it wasn't really making him into a different dog that I was really concerned [about]. And so, the three weeks went by and I just said to my husband, and I called the woman in New Milford, and I told her, “I'm keeping him,” and everyone on Piglet's page, of course, was delighted because everyone wanted us to keep Georgie. And Piglet, over a few months now, he was most upset because Georgie was in the kitchen and he couldn't go into his regular bed in there. So, once we sorted that out, they each have a bed, they sleep right next to each other in their own little beds. Yesterday he went into Piglet's bed and Piglet was a little disgruntled and he was crying, but he wasn't aggressive towards him or anything. He just wanted me to get him out of the bed. He knows how to communicate because he's very smart, and we took care of it.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

They're figuring it out, and that's also such a beautiful lesson. They're figuring it out because you have given these beautiful dogs a second chance, not just at life, but what incredible educators they are in terms of helping everyone that meets them understand bigger pictures about our own relationships. So, I am so thankful that Janet nominated you for our Game Changer, and thank you so much for taking time today to share your amazing story with all of us. We're so thankful for everything your entire family is doing.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

Thank you. Thanks for having me. Thanks for-

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Aww, this was wonderful.

**Dr. Melissa Shapiro:**

-bringing our message around.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Of course. I love it. Look at you. Yeah, you have a happy family. This is wonderful.