

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep428_Birse_211102.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:03]

You've tuned in to the Community Cats Podcast. Ready, Let's go.

Stacy LeBaron [00:00:14]

Welcome to the Community Cats Podcast. I am your host, Stacy LeBaron. I've been involved helping homeless cats for over 20 years with the Merrimack River Feline Rescue Society. The goal of this podcast is to expose you to amazing people who are improving the lives of cats. I hope these interviews will help you learn how you can turn your passion for cats into action. And today we're speaking with Dr. David Birse. Doctor Birse is with Home Heart Vets, and it was founded by two cat-loving veterinarians passionate about enhancing end-of-life care for pets in New York City, New Jersey and Philadelphia, years of private practice left them dissatisfied with the experience granted to the vast majority of pets at the end of their lives. That started their journey towards the foundation of Home Heart Vets. Unfortunately, the vast majority of parents are unaware of the option of a home euthanasia. Though sad, euthanasia can be a gift and the vets believe that in-home option is the most compassionate for all involved. David, welcome to the show.

David Birse [00:01:15]

Thank you so much for having me.

Stacy LeBaron [00:01:16]

So, before we jump into the work of Home Heart Vets. First, tell me how did you become passionate about cats?

David Birse [00:01:23]

Well, first, it was dogs, and I've become a cat lover and I definitely am a cat person, but it didn't start that way. My grandfather was blind and he had guide dogs. And so growing up I saw the amazing bond and connection that he had and the value and the service that he got from those dogs. It was amazing to see him be able to get around and navigate the streets all on his own, without any help, with the help of his dogs and that set me on the path to becoming a veterinarian. And then, in vet school, it was my first kind of introduction and exposure to cats. And that's when I

started to shift the balance slightly and I now have two cats of my own, no dogs at the moment. So I've become well and truly a cat lover.

Stacy LeBaron [00:02:11]

Wow, that's very interesting. When you were at veterinary school, did you do more work with cats than with dogs? I know some schools it's very different. There are some opportunities, more opportunities for work with cats than dogs, some schools focus on surgery more, some schools focus on other areas. So what was your experience like?

David Birse [00:02:29]

It was quite an even mix to be honest, a balance of dogs and cats, but I didn't understand the behavior of cats. They're so difficult to understand as an outsider and as I started to see them and witness them and get exposed to them a little bit more. I realized that there's so much to them, so much more to them than first meets the eye. So, it was an equal mix of cats and dogs, but that's what started to shift me.

Stacy LeBaron [00:02:52]

And then after you got out of veterinary school, did you go and just join a general private practice?

David Birse [00:02:58]

I did, I did. So I am from Scotland, but I live in New Jersey now and so after finishing vet school I moved upstate in New York just a little bit outside of the city and I worked in a practice there, private practice there and it was a practice that saw dogs and cats and that was my first introduction to working as a veterinary hospital.

Stacy LeBaron [00:03:17]

There's been a lot of information about the stress and the strain on veterinarians, as well as technicians in the field. Before Covid, we were even hearing stories about that and then Covid hit. What was your experience as a veterinarian in private practice? Was it a very stressful environment for you? Or was it an environment that you just accepted and believed this was what was going to happen.

David Birse [00:03:42]

I'm glad you brought that up. It is a very challenging profession to be in and veterinarians are such compassionate and caring individuals as a whole and you're

faced with really challenging situations, people who love their pets, but maybe can't afford the best care having to navigate the compromise for each patient and having to treat each one individually with respect with the best possible outcome with those limitations in place. And then also and it segways into the work that I do now, but the end-of-life piece of dealing with animals having to communicate difficult news to families and to guide them through end-of-life can definitely take an emotional toll on veterinarians. So, it is a stressful profession to be in, but it also is such a rewarding profession as well.

Stacy LeBaron [00:04:28]

So you've mentioned that you've moved to a niche and you're serving sort of a certain piece of an animal's life. So, you know, how did you make this choice to really specialize in the area of home euthanasia?

David Birse [00:04:41]

So my my co-founder Sam, was in vet school with me. And she was living in LA working for a similar organization as we now have started and we realized that in New York there wasn't really anyone doing it in quite the same way. And so, we saw the need for pet owners to have the option to say goodbye to their pets at home. We feel really strongly about the benefit. So, we decided to fill that gap that we saw and to be able to offer that to pet owners in the tri-state area.

Stacy LeBaron [00:05:13]

And you first started this about in 2017, I believe you said.

David Birse [00:05:23]

That's right. Yeah, that's right.

Stacy LeBaron [00:05:25]

You've been doing it for about four years. Over the years, have had many veterinarians, come to my house and help with euthanizing cats when I felt it was their time. And that is a very loaded statement by saying, I felt it was their time. How do you help guide owners in helping make that decision of, you know, when is it time? Did I do it too early? Did I do it too late? Did I wait too long were they suffering? How can I tell? I assume there's a lot of counseling that goes into that.

David Birse [00:05:50]

Absolutely. That's where it always begins with a lot of conversation with the pet owners. Sometimes people have had lots of pets and they kind of know how to make that decision. But a lot of times it's the first time that a person has gone through that situation. And so there is a lot of guidance and we try to assess the animal holistically across a lot of different areas. Is the animal seeming to be in pain or discomfort or what diagnosis or diagnoses do they have. And what prognosis is associated with it. Are they eating normally, are they drinking? Are they able to look after themselves and keep themselves hygienic? Are they mobile? Are they able to get around the way that they used to be able to get around and do they subjectively seem to be happy. Are they playing? Are they interacting in the way that they did? So, there's so many different factors that we consider, and it's kind of a combination of all of those things together, that gives us a sense of, whether it might be time. I think a lot of the time people are more inclined to wait. And we do see cases where perhaps the decision has been made a little later than would have been in the best interests of the animal and it's sad when we see that, but we understand how easy it is to fall into that trap and we try to counsel people to not have that regret.

Stacy LeBaron [00:07:10]

So in your mind, what is the reason for euthanasia services being able to exist? I mean, there are there is a camp of people out there saying, you know, I like my cats to die naturally and as without going into the politics of the whole issue, in your mind, how do you present the fact that that euthanasia is potentially a gift for the cats that we have in our care?

David Birse [00:07:36]

Absolutely. So, being a vet. I've seen both the natural passing of a pet, as well as euthanasia more than most people will have. And I think there's an optimism that maybe their cat will fall asleep, and it will be very peaceful and absolutely that can sometimes happen. And it is a blessing when that's the case that they just don't wake up in the morning, but all too often it's associated with a much more distressing situation, difficulty breathing, perhaps, or seizures things that are quite traumatic, not just for the cat, but also, for the owner of the cat. And so, that's, that's a troubling situation that is completely avoidable. Of course. I have to be sure that it is the time and that's the trickiest part. But if you know that the time is in the next few days, it's

definitely in my opinion kinder to use euthanasia instead of waiting and hoping for the best that they will pass comfortably on their own.

Stacy LeBaron [00:08:37]

Do private veterinarians refer folks to you that would like to have the home services?

David Birse [00:08:44]

Absolutely, absolutely. So, we talked about how difficult, the veterinary profession is and private practitioners don't generally have the time and the bandwidth to be able to go out to attend clients in an in-home environment and most vets understand the benefit and they will have clients occasionally ask for that service. So sometimes private practices will send a vet out, especially if it's a client they've known for years or someone that they are friendly with something like that, but they often will refer to us and we're there to kind of support the veterinary ecosystem and landscape in that way. We work very closely with private practices to be able to offer that service to their clients. Yeah,

Stacy LeBaron [00:09:25]

We touched upon earlier a bit about economic euthanasia which seems to be a new sort of tagline that we talked about with regards to private practices, shelters folks bringing in their cats and wanting to euthanize because the cat is diabetic and, you know, they can't afford the insulin. They can't afford the glucose curves that they have to do for monitoring, or the cat as a heart issue and they need to do ultrasounds. Do you get those kinds of requests and have to counsel folks through on that? Do you have to sort of have that sort of moral distress is a phrase that I have heard where, you know, there are things you can do, but they can't afford it and we've touched upon that earlier, but there's compassion fatigue, but there's also this moral distress which is, you know, something can be done, but you don't have the resources to be able to do it.

David Birse [00:10:15]

Absolutely. And so, although our practices limit focus on and not of all of those different conditions as well, because we do have to guide people when they call us to help them find options. Maybe there is something they haven't considered, a lower cost option that although it might not be the gold standard of care and treatment might be satisfactory and giving the pet a good quality, a good enough quality of life

for longer. And so, we do find ourselves having conversations like that with pet owners and trying to guide them. But unfortunately, there are situations where we do encounter situations just like you described and it's amazing what kind of options now exist. It's almost like human health care. I mean you can treat different types of cancer, there's incredible surgical interventions that exist. And so, with enough financial resources the sky is really the limit almost, in how far you can go. And so that situation you're describing becomes more and more common as the options that exist become more and more extensive but also much more expensive to do those things. And so I think every vet falls and finds a natural place where they sit on that spectrum of feeling good and comfortable about the decision based upon an assessment of the pet's prognosis. How re-homeable is the animal? Maybe the cat can be re-homed to a friend or a family member who has more time available to look after it. Also bearing in mind, the distress that rehoming sometimes can cause. So, it's such a complicated issue. So many factors to be considered and it can never be as easy as a black and white answer that's spit out. So it's very subjective. Every case is evaluated on its own merits and it and it is definitely a challenge.

Stacy LeBaron [00:12:07]

So, instead of also getting your veterinary degree. You also needed to become a therapist.

David Birse [00:12:10]

Absolutely. Yes, definitely, definitely. In fact, I've sometimes given consideration to pursuing that. Yes. Yes.

Stacy LeBaron [00:12:22]

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Stacy LeBaron [00:13:54]

With all the experience that you've had, you know, with helping end of life passing of cats, you know, there are several chronic diseases out there, diseases out there that we are actually, as a society I think, sort of afraid of, you know, Feline Leukemia is one disease and it's a disease I'm extremely passionate about. I have been adopting out Feline Leukemia positive cats since 1996 and they, you know, have lived wonderful, healthy lives and the folks in our organization or in the organization I used to run, I still fondly think of it that way, when it comes to the end-of-life workout with Feline Leukemia. There are a lot of similarities in the cases and I would assume the same as with renal failure kitties, I've had a couple of those diabetic kitties So when they're getting near the end, there are some similar patterns and you're nodding as we're talking here. So it sounds like you see those patterns in your practice.

David Birse [00:14:51]

Yeah. Absolutely. You know, there's often some similarities across those conditions. Weight loss is very common, changes in appetite. Often, by the time we're asked to help a cat, it will be skin and bones, you know, half the way it used to be ailing, drinking a lot urinating a lot, starting to have accidents, perhaps, changes in its sleep patterns, vocalizing during the evening and the night hours, things like that. So, there are some common signs that we see across different conditions. Yes.

Stacy LeBaron [00:15:26]

Yeah, so it's very interesting to me because a lot of people will ask me questions about adopting like a Feline Leukemia positive cat and they're worried, oh the veterinary costs are going to be huge for adopting a cat with a condition, or FIV or something like that and there's still so much education that we need to do for folks in being able to understand that end of life might not be any different or might be even less expensive with a Feline Leukemia positive cat, than a renal failure kitty or something like that, too. So, when I adopted out, first Feline Leukemia cat. I adopted Nala, out to a seven-year-old girl. And I asked the mom, I said, well, you know, are you sure you're okay with her adopting Nala, who you know, has Feline Leukemia and she said, you know, we all know that there's end of life sometime. We have to learn about it and it's the bond that's created initially that's the most important. And this little girl and Nala the cat really bonded right away in the adoption center and that always stayed with me that, you know, we have to learn about end of life throughout our life and, and it's that companionship, that you have right away. So, with that being said, we talked a lot sort of about the cats. Now, the clients, the people that you're working with and we talked about needing to be a therapist, to a certain degree. What are the greatest challenges and working with folks? Is it that therapy component in helping them walk over that bridge with the cat?

David Birse [00:16:56]

I think we have different phases of our approach because there's the initial reach at the client outreach to us where we're helping them to even decide whether it's time to make the decision and then there's the countdown of hours, or a day or two that they're waiting for us and all the things that they're ruminating on at home while they're waiting for us to arrive, you know, they might know that this is the last time they're taking their dog for a walk, for example. Or the last night that they're going to have their cat lying next to them. And that is very poignant to have that time be so limited and to know that there's an endpoint that is coming. So that is a challenge. And then when we arrive we have to guide them through the process, which again, they may never have seen before and then afterwards as well, because grief is a process that can last for days, weeks, months, or years. And so, we try to, where possible, have ways to help clients with each of those phases of the process.

Stacy LeBaron [00:17:59]

Yeah, one thing. I found very helpful. You don't want to think about it, but you should think about what do you need or want during that process. You know, do you want need to be with the animal? Do you not want to be with the animal but then see the animal afterwards or do you not even want to do that? So, try and make those decisions ahead of time rather than in the moment, I would say

David Birse [00:18:24]

Exactly, and we try to make sure that we offer all of those different options that clients may not have thought about. I think the in-home environment allows us to be very flexible to best meet the needs of the pet, as well as the pet parent. So we've been on beaches and in parks, and under kitchen tables, and we try to make sure the experience is as positive and as uplifting for everybody as possible.

Stacy LeBaron [00:18:51]

That's brilliant. Wonderful and beautiful. If folks are interested in finding out about your program, how would they find out more about our work?

David Birse [00:19:01]

So our website is homeheartvets.com and we're also on Instagram, and on Facebook, HomeHeartVets. So we are we have a lot of information and some resources there for people to learn about end-of-life and the decision-making surrounding it. And we're also always available, the veterinary consultations that we offer by phone are free to help guide people in that decision-making process.

Stacy LeBaron [00:19:25]

And one other side question. I'm going to ask before we ask the next question too is, have you ever had any contact with some of the veterinarians that work in a shelter environment and maybe euthanizing cats due to space constraints and have you had any sort of a mentoring relationship or a way to try and just relate with them and help them in their very challenging position that they're in?

David Birse [00:19:49]

So not directly with shelter vets, but we do go into private practices and that includes vets that work in shelters to offer resources to help with the actual techniques of euthanasia. So that's the more technical aspect of what we do because not only are we performing the euthanasia in home, but we also have an approach that is as

gentle and stress-free for the animal with minimal restraint required, as little injections or discomfort to the animal as possible. And so those techniques we try to educate the veterinary community about ways that even if the euthanasia is happening in the shelter, or in a veterinary hospital, there's still a better way to approach the actual process from a technical perspective. And so, we try to educate the veterinary community on that front.

Stacy LeBaron [00:20:39]

That's fantastic. Wonderful. Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today, David?

David Birse [00:20:44]

The only thing I think actually is just to mention I'm so glad that you brought up the end of the process doesn't end with the visit, grief is persistent. And so, we're starting to partner with a licensed clinical psychologist to be able to offer support beyond the visit as well and there's more information about that will be available on our website.

Stacy LeBaron [00:21:05]

Thank you again, so much for agreeing to be a guest on the show, David and I hope we'll have you on again in the future.

Kristen Petrie [00:21:12]

That's it for this week. Please head over to Apple Podcasts and leave a review. We love to hear what you think and a five-star review really helps others find the show. You can also join the conversation with listeners cat caretakers, and me on Facebook and Instagram and don't forget to hit follow or subscribe on Spotify. Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, YouTube, Stitcher or wherever you listen to podcasts, so you don't miss a single show. Thanks for listening. And thank you for everything that you do to help create a safe and healthy world for cats. Did you attend our recent Online Feline Leukemia Day? We hope you learned some new and surprising information from the presentations that will help you save more cats. Events like Feline Leukemia Day would not be possible without the generous sponsorships of the following organizations, the Tompkins Foundation for Feline Leukemia Advocacy, Humane Network, and Vetz Petz. Would you like to support content that helps save

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