

# CommunityCatsPodcast\_Ep416\_Ducharme\_210810.mp3

**Kristen Petrie** [00:00:02]

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

**Stacy LeBaron** [00:00:13]

Welcome to the Community Cats Podcast. I am your host, Stacy LeBaron. I've been involved helping homeless cats for over twenty 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. Today, we're speaking with Rick DuCharme. There is no doubt that two key words come to mind when describing Rick. Passion and vision. Rick moved from a passionate local animal welfare volunteer to a leading national no-kill advocate and visionary, is a story that is both compelling and inspiring. It was his passion born from his days as a child bringing stray pets home from the streets of Waterloo, Iowa with his mother, that launched his life-long commitment to animal welfare. It was when his mother told him that some of those animals would not make it out of the shelter alive, that perhaps the earliest vision for his work to make this a no-kill nation was first evident. While employed in the heavy equipment industry, Rick infused his passion and his professional skills as he became an active volunteer in the animal welfare category. Bringing his business experience to the movement, he came to understand that an effective spay/neuter program was a vital first step, and he became a member of the mayor's task force for animal control in Jacksonville and the driving force behind the city's eventual drive to become a no-kill community. His passion and vision came together when he founded First Coast No More Homeless Pets in two thousand two, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to ending the killing of dogs and cats in Duval County and beyond. Rick grew the organization into a national thought leader in the no-kill movement, a key partner for local shelters across two states, a ten-thousand square mile service area, and become a life-saving part of the first coast community as the area has achieved no-kill status with local partners in the core three county metro area. In two thousand thirteen, while at First Coast No More Homeless Pets, Rick was one of three founders of the Target Zero Institute, a program that has helped dozens of

communities along with their evolution to higher live release rates. When Rick left First Coast No More Homeless pets in July two thousand nineteen, it was a ten-plus million dollar-a-year organization with a hundred and sixty-five paid team members, including twenty-plus veterinarians operating two large safety net hospitals, with a combined twenty thousand square feet of hospital space. First Coast No More Homeless Pets also operates other life-saving programs including a regional pet food bank, shelter, neuter/return programs, and mega adoption events. Rick has now founded RLD Consulting LLC, to help organizations anywhere that are working to save more dogs and cats. He specializes in access to veterinary care, spay/neuter clinics, nonprofit startups, along with other topics of importance to animal welfare nonprofit organizations. This group is also willing to work with for-profit hospitals providing low-cost services. He has expertise in feasibility studies, strategic plans, implementation and sustainability. Rick, I'd like to welcome you to the show.

**Rick DuCharme** [00:03:25]

Thanks so much, Stacy. I always enjoy talking with you.

**Stacy** [00:03:29]

Yeah, it's great. It's been a while and I'm so glad we're going to have a chance to catch up and hear more about the new things that you are working on these days. But first and foremost, you know, for folks that haven't heard your previous podcast, which folks can go in to Community Cats Podcast.com, go into the search bar and just put Rick, or Ducharme, in the search bar and his past podcast will come up. You accurately defined here in your bio about, you know, your childhood being around animals and you developed a passion for it but you also had an interest in business. So it seemed like you first entered the business world and you didn't take sort of that normal route, which is, a lot of people say, oh, I loved animals as a child. I always wanted to be a veterinarian but then I got into sheltering, but you went into business. So, how did that happen?

**Rick** [00:04:20]

Well, I guess you know that probably came about because when I started to look into veterinary school and becoming a veterinarian, I realized that it took a lot more than just learning how to diagnose tummy aches in dogs and cats, and you had to do a lot of studying. And veterinary school was very expensive, even back then, and it just

wasn't in the cards for our family to send me to eight years of college. So I ended up going to a two-year business college and took some business courses and sales and marketing and management, and went that way. And it worked out pretty well for me and did well for years and really set up a good foundation, I think, for starting a non-profit and growing it because I had a good grasp of the business end of that world rather than just the emotional part about wanting to help dogs and cats.

**Stacy** [00:05:21]

So, you know, I've talked to several people on the podcast about going from a for-profit space, or from that corporate world into the nonprofit space. Would you call that transition a smooth transition for you or are the two beings very different from one another?

**Rick** [00:05:38]

Oh, well, they are very different from one another and especially as I was in the heavy equipment world before, so it definitely was a big change and a lot of differences there, but it's really, I think, the important thing though is that everything we do is about relationships and how we interact with the people around us. And I think that the, you know, the sales and marketing part of my previous life is what really set me up for success in the animal welfare world as well. So I think you know, the analytical part being able to look at statistics and numbers and make rational decisions based on, you know, on real facts and figures rather than emotions, really helped me a lot in the nonprofit world.

**Stacy** [00:06:26]

So you've achieved tremendous success with regards to providing significant spay/neuter services in your past work in Florida. Is that still the bedrock for success in handling overpopulation, as well as quality of life for our animals in the community? Is that really, the high-volume, high-quality spay/neuter clinic, is that still our first go to program?

**Rick** [00:06:55]

In order to reach a, you know, high live release rate in any community, it takes a wide variety of services, not just spay and neuter. But I believe, like you said, that spay/neuter really is the bedrock of those services and that's really the foundation. If you have a good foundation of available and targeted spay/neuter services in the

community, then you can build upon that and add the other programs that help to impact euthanasia in shelters. But spay and neuter will definitely help to bring down the numbers of pets entering the shelter to start with. So that overall, the community has fewer pets to deal with and fewer pets that need to be rehomed. And then there can be, you know, the other programs like the shelter-neuter-return programs, and mega adoption events and so on, that really do have continued to have an impact on shelter euthanasia. But getting the overall number of pets entering shelters down, I think our best tool in our in our toolbox is targeted spay/neuter programs.

**Stacy** [00:07:59]

A lot has changed in animal welfare over the last year or so, since we've been, you know, hit with COVID. In your consultancy, you know, what are the sort of trends that you have seen happening over the last year?

**Rick** [00:08:15]

Well, certainly, you know, just like with the United Spay Alliance Conference this year, and the other conferences, you know, we're all doing a lot more Zoom meetings and having to figure out how to do things without a lot of interaction with people. Whether that's donors and, you know, in the in the fundraising part end of the business, or adopters or people wanting to relinquish their pets, you know, we've had to figure out how to handle those with minimal contact with people which can be a challenge. But I think it's also, it's also brought about a lot of different opportunities for the nonprofit animal welfare world as well. And certainly, you know, virtual classes work to help people keep pets in homes and a lot of that type of stuff that. We're doing a lot of curbside business now, in shelters, you know, where people come to adopt and they maybe have to look online for their pet and then the team brings out pets for, you know, to introduce to people curbside or, you know, stuff like that. So we've had to make a lot of adjustments in the animal welfare world but some of those are probably going to stick even after we get back to normal after COVID. So it's interesting to see how innovative the animal welfare world has been over the past year to really keep things rolling.

**Stacy** [00:09:37]

One of the biggest concerns that has come out of it and, I believe it was a pre-existing condition that just got inflamed basically, by COVID, is a sense that there's a

shortage of veterinarians as well as technicians across the field. Are you seeing that with the clients that you're working with?

**Rick** [00:09:54]

Oh, absolutely. One of the things I stay busiest with is clients needing help recruiting veterinarians for their clinics, for their shelters, for their spay/neuter operations. Definitely that's, that's something that we're going to continue to experience for the foreseeable future. I think that, you know, there's not really an end in sight to that problem. In fact, I can only envision it becoming more and more difficult to hire veterinarians. As, you know, as more older veterinarians retire and there's more and more opportunities for the veterinarians graduating from college, with the explosion of veterinary clinics. And the, in the way that corporate veterinary chains have grown so dramatically and will continue to grow, I think we're just going to continue to see a worsening of that challenge and it's something we're all just going to have to get really good at is recruiting veterinarians. In fact, you know, I'm working with four different shelters or clinics right now, nonprofits, that I'm helping to recruit veterinarians with and that's pretty much a steady number for me. It's just, you know, it takes a lot more work to hire veterinarians than it did just five years ago.

**Stacy** [00:11:10]

Are there things that we can do. I'm just trying to think of some of the tasks that veterinarians are required to do but may not necessarily be the best use of their time or, are there things that we can try and advocate for, you know, that may be a certified veterinary technician could do. I mean, one of the things is looking at a veterinarian and how they use their time and ensuring that they're using their time as a veterinarian should use their time, and not other things that someone else could do. Are those, some of the things that you look at also?

**Rick** [00:11:44]

Absolutely. There's lots of ways that we can extend the, you know, the reach of the veterinarians that we do have. And certainly using certified veterinary technicians, or even just experienced technicians to do a lot of the work that, you know, used to be a veterinarian would do it. And make sure that we're using those veterinarians just to do the things that we really need veterinarians to do as far as the medical end of things. And then also, we're looking at using apps and you know, the health apps for

pets that are available now. And I think one of the things that we can certainly do is advocate for the state associations, the state veterinary boards, to allow more and more use of apps and more establishing that client-veterinary relationship, patient-vet relationship, so they can actually do things like prescribe and see clients through an app rather than having, you know, to make people come to the veterinary clinic. I think that helps the patients but it also allows the veterinarians to see a lot more clients in an hour. And there's a lot of things that the veterinarian doesn't have to do, a hands-on exam, for, to reach a conclusion and set up a treatment plan. And then we, as far as retaining veterinarians, and I think that's one of the things that we really have to look at in the nonprofit world, is to help make sure that we're doing proper things to retain the veterinarians that we do have working in the nonprofit world. Making sure, just like with all of our team members, that they have a good work-life balance and we're not overworking them, and, you know, and thinking that they can work twelve hours a day, every day, and making sure that the veterinarians are a real partner in the management of the organization, if they want that responsibility. And taking their viewpoints into consideration when making those important decisions for our organization. So, I think there's a lot of things that we can do to, you know, to continue to increase the number of veterinarians entering the nonprofit world with, but then also to retain the veterinarians that we currently have here.

– *Start mid-roll advertising-*

**Stacy** [00:14:02]

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**Kristen** [00:15:02]

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**Stacy** [00:15:09]

Are you ready to be part of the solution for feral and stray cats in your neighborhood? If so, then make sure to sign up for our next Neighborhood Cats TNR Certification Workshop. A new workshop is held online each month, generally on the first Saturday of the month, but please check our website for exact dates. For just ten dollars, expert instructors will teach you best practices for trap-neuter and return, TNR. Learn what TNR is and why it works. We'll cover getting along with neighbors, preparations for trapping, trapping itself, including entire colonies at once, feeding, providing winter shelter and more. Take advantage of the interactive format, extensive handouts, and video footage of actual projects. Attendees will receive a certificate of attendance and gain access to an ongoing Facebook group, for networking with other TNR activists. The two-and-a-half-hour workshop is led by Susan Richmond, the executive director of Neighborhood Cats, and Brian Kortis, Neighborhood Cats National Programs Director. To find out the date of the next workshop and sign up, just visit [communitycatspodcast.com](https://communitycatspodcast.com).

**Stacy** [00:16:11]

As we emerge from the global pandemic of COVID, fostering is emerging as the new normal in the animal welfare industry, but shelter management software doesn't provide the tools or the workflows for communicating with fosters at scale. So many organizations struggle to maintain hundreds of animals in foster homes. If only there was a system that was custom built specifically to solve this problem. Introducing Fosterspace, powered by our friends at Doobert. Fosterspace was custom built to allow you to manage hundreds of foster relationships and to communicate with them via text, email, and even Facebook Messenger. Your fosters have a portal where they can upload videos and photos and updates on their animals and organizations can schedule fosters for meet-and-greets, adoption days, or anything else they need.

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*-End mid-roll advertising-*

**Stacy** [00:16:45]

So before we hit the record button, you were talking a little bit about a project that you're working on at the University of Tennessee. Would you be interested in sharing a bit about that?

**Rick** [00:16:55]

Absolutely. That's working with Dr. Michael Blackwell and his team at the University of Tennessee, as part of the access to the AlignCare Program, which is really setting up a network of communities throughout the country, to help provide access to veterinary care, particularly to low-income pet owners around the country. And that's something that's been near and dear to my heart for years, even back in the, in the days running the organization. You know, I realized quickly that we could offer spay and neuter, but sometimes people coming to the clinic just needed to see a veterinarian and didn't have any other options. And so that's why at First Coast, we started offering more and more services to pet owners nation, around the area. And we actually had, at First Coast, we'd have people drive down as far away from South Carolina and North Carolina, all the way to Florida, to get veterinary care because they weren't able to find access to care closer to them. And that's something that really stuck with me throughout the years. So when I had the opportunity to work with Dr. Blackwell and his team, to expand access to veterinary care nationwide, it was something I jumped at immediately. And here's something for our listeners to consider, Stacy, is that with the exciting success that we've seen in decreasing shelter euthanasia throughout the years, Best Friends is now estimating that there's fewer than one million dogs and cats dying in shelters every year that could be saved. The fact is that there's more pets dying in veterinary hospitals nationwide, that could be saved due to economic euthanasia, when the pet owners can't afford to pay for the cost of veterinary care. So they're offered euthanasia instead. That number is probably somewhere, you know, I estimate, somewhere up around three to four million dogs and cats, dying in veterinary clinics every year, that could be saved which, you know, eclipses the number of dogs and cats now dying in shelters



that could be saved. So I think that's the next big challenge for animal welfare is, how do we figure out a way to save those dogs and cats that already have families, loving families, that are dying in veterinary hospitals due to economic euthanasia. So working with Dr. Blackwell is certainly one way to tackle that problem.

**Stacy** [00:19:30]

It's a great point and it's definitely, I think, the next stage of where we're going to be focusing a lot of our efforts with regards to being able to have affordable care for the lifespan of the cat or the dog, not just that affordable spay/neuter. And that's really exciting and it's great. When you work with clients as a consultant, I mean, do you advise them on, you know, say, how to open up one of these AlignCare clinics or you advise them on their program or you help them with, you know, veterinary recruitment? Is it piecemeal? Do you create something individually for an organization or do they come to you for a certain type of package?

**Rick** [00:20:12]

All of the above. Really Stacy, just to clarify, though. AlignCare is really utilizing resources that already exist in the communities and not setting up clinics. With my other clients, I really do all the above, starting with the strategic plan for the organization that incorporates adding access to veterinary care projects, to doing assessments of existing clinics or planning new clinics. One of the projects that I love the most is helping to design floor plans for new clinics, that's always fun for me. And recruiting veterinarians or recruiting management, doing clinic planning. Really, you know, we can work with the clients, I can work with the clients really. However they need assistance, whether it's piecemeal, hey I need help with this piece, maybe a strategic plan or floor plan, or recruiting veterinarians. Or even taking an interim position while we find the proper management team, get the proper management team in place for the veterinarian, for the nonprofit organizations. You know, I can do really, I can put together a package for them that really fits the needs of any nonprofit organization. And of course, we try and keep it very affordable to help all the nonprofits that we can.

**Stacy** [00:21:37]

What do you think the role is of, you know, we have so many small rescue based organizations and then we sort of have our mid-level ones and then we have our

much larger ones. I mean, how do you think we should all interact with one another? I sometimes feel like you know the big kids are over here, and the little kids are over here, and they both seem to have different issues. And I kind of wish sometimes, we all got together, and I just wondered if you see that happening too.

**Rick** [00:22:06]

Oh, absolutely. And we talk about that a lot in AlignCare, how, you know, it seems like the nonprofits each like to be in their own little world and, and not really work amongst each other, with each other. And, and that's unfortunate. That is definitely something we have to change because every one of those nonprofits out there has a place for helping animals as part of the puzzle, that's going to be the solution to pet overpopulation or to, to economic euthanasia, whichever challenge it is. So we're working on it all the time, and every one of them, and we can't complete the puzzle without every piece in it. So, you know, I think that it's very important for all the nonprofits, whatever size they are, to work together as much as possible. You know, if it's rescue groups taking animals from shelters that are overburdened and, or if it's clinics operating independently, nonprofit clinics operating independently, whatever the case may be. I think, you know, we all have to work together. I think one area that's definitely going to be a growing market in the animal welfare world is those nonprofit veterinary hospitals. When you look at the numbers in the human medicine side of things, seventy-five percent of all hospitals are either nonprofit or government run. That's about fifty percent of them are nonprofit and about twenty-five percent of them are government-run, according to a study done by the Kaiser Family Foundation. And so, I think that that's something that's definitely in the future for animal welfare, is operating these nonprofit safety net hospitals. And so I think nonprofits of all sizes can look at that opportunity as a way to grow their organizations or to expand the reach of their organizations, to be able to reach these people that do need access to veterinary care.

**Stacy** [00:24:05]

If you met someone today, who was thinking about starting up a non-profit like you did many years ago, what advice would you give them?

**Rick** [00:24:15]

I think probably the biggest piece of advice is to find what they want to focus on and then really try and focus on that issue. When I started First Coast, of course our mission was to end the killing of dogs and cats in the area shelters, then help the adjoining communities do the same thing and we really accomplished that mission. When I left First Coast, four of the area counties that surrounded Jacksonville were all saving more than ninety percent of the pets coming into their shelters. And so that was really our focus. And once we accomplished that, then we realized that lack of access to veterinary care was the next thing that we wanted to work on. And I think that's really the important thing, is for people starting a non-profit now is to come up with a plan to solve a particular problem that they have an interest in or that they see is a big need in their community and then to do that. But also to look around in the community and make sure that they're not duplicating services that somebody else is already doing and doing a good job of. Now if somebody says they're doing, you know, providing the service but there's still a big need for that service in the community, then certainly you can go ahead and start another nonprofit to do that, but make sure we're not just duplicating services that somebody else is doing. But also plan for growth with your nonprofit, just like at First Coast. When I started First Coast, it was, I was the only volunteer we had. We had no employees and we had no other volunteers. And of course, I grew that into a, you know, a really large organization that was able to help sixty or seventy thousand patients every year in our hospitals. And so, you know, keep that in mind is, how do I build this organization so that it can grow into something that will have the maximum impact and that's where a good strategic plan comes in handy. Although that plan will change frequently and maybe even, you know, every year or more even more frequently. I think we've all had to change our plans dramatically over the last year, probably several times, but I think you know, having a plan and working that plan, even knowing that the plan may change, is important to achieving your goals.

**Stacy** [00:26:39]

Rick, if folks are interested in finding out more about the work that you do, how would they reach out to you?

**Rick** [00:26:44]

Well, they can check out our website [RLD Consulting Services.com](https://RLDConsultingServices.com) or, of course, we're on Facebook at RLD Consulting Services, LLC, or you can go to my personal Facebook page, which is Rick Ducharme obviously or email me at [rick@rldconsultingservices.com](mailto:rick@rldconsultingservices.com). I'd love to hear from them in any of those ways.

**Stacy** [00:27:09]

Super. Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today?

**Rick** [00:27:13]

Well, I just like to say, you know, if you think you need help with your nonprofit, whatever size it is, feel free to reach out to me and we'll have a phone call. I never charge anything. Give everybody at least a free 30-minute phone conversation to help them figure out what they need to do. And if there's something I can help them with that fits into their plan, then I'm always happy to talk with them about that as well. But I'm always happy to give free advice and love to hear from your listeners about what their plans are and how they're going to make a difference because every one of them can make a true difference in their own communities.

**Stacy** [00:27:51]

Rick, I want to thank you so much for agreeing to be a guest on my show and also for supporting the United Spay Alliance Online Conference this year. We really appreciate it and I hope we'll have you on the show again in the future.

**Rick** [00:28:02]

Always happy to be here, Stacy, and it's always great to hear your podcast. I love to listen to them and hear from all the exciting people you talk with.

**Stacy** [00:28:12]

That's great.

**Stacy** [00:28:15]

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.

**Kristen** [00:28:38]

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