

CommunityCatsPodcast_Ep425_Diehl_211012.mp3

Kristen Petrie [00:00:03]

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 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. Kelly Deal. Dr. Deal is the foundation's senior director of Science and Communication. She received her DVM from the University of Tennessee and started her own practice career in a bustling emergency clinic in New Jersey, eventually, going on to become an owner in a large referral practice. After 14 years there, she left to pursue a career in medical communication and joined Morris Animal Foundation in 2013. Dr. Deal is a board-certified Small Animal Internal Medicine specialist and a certified veterinary journalist. She lives in Colorado with her husband, two children, three cats, Oh boy, too many fish to count and a very lovable Labrador Retriever. I just want to share a little bit of information about the Morris Animal Foundation, which is a global leader in supporting studies to find solutions to serious health threats to animals. Since its founding, it has invested more than 136 million dollars and nearly three thousand studies that improved the health and quality of life for dogs, cats, horses, and wildlife around the world. Dr. Deal. I'd like to welcome you to the show.

Kelly Diehl [00:01:42]

Great. Thanks. Thanks so much for having me on, Stacy.

Stacy LeBaron [00:01:45]

So of course, my first question that I ask all my guests is, how did you become passionate about cats?

Kelly Diehl [00:01:52]

Well, I, my first personal pet was a cat that I got from my neighbor. I think, like a lots of people, I was six. And that was Fluffy who very quickly transferred her affections from me to my father, and my parents were both cat lovers as well and had cats as

kids, and we lived in a really small house. So cats really made sense to us. So we had cats the whole time I was growing up and of course, like a lot of people I went from very early on wanted to be a veterinarian and really, cats were my first exposure to a lot of animals that we had, all kinds. Like a lot of vets, we had gerbils, mice, a crayfish one time, you know, whatever we could drag home. And so that's how I really, you know, cats were always part of my life. In fact, I can scarcely remember a time and I don't want to date myself, but I'm 59, that I have not had a cat since I was 6, and Fluffy. And obviously, as a small animal veterinarian, cats were a huge part of my practice. And I really enjoyed working with cats. And, you know, dealing with them. So, I've been a cat person a long time now. And of course, I have three that we got from a shelter about three years ago. Just very quickly, we went, and we asked for kittens, you know, we're looking for kittens and they bring in three that are from a family. And I knew right away, like there is no way, we are going to leave any kittens behind. We came for either one or two cats, and we knew we were leaving with three and we did. And so now I have three two-year-olds.

Stacy LeBaron [00:03:27]

Excellent. Wow. Well, you just kept the whole family together. So that was great. That's very, very cool. And it's great that you've had cats, you know, your whole life. You probably can't even imagine a world without cats.

Kelly Diehl [00:03:38]

Not anymore. I really can't. They have been with me almost, you know, except for a few periods like in college, but even in vet school, I had cats. Even when I moved to Colorado, pretty quickly, I think, within a month or two of being here. I adopted my first two cats and, and yeah, it's been cats ever since.

Stacy LeBaron [00:04:00]

So, tell me a bit about the Morris Animal Foundation. You've been with them for seven years. There must have been some motivation for you to leave private practice to work for an organization that may not be considered specifically as hands-on. And so, tell us about the foundation and tell us about why you felt it was important to join them.

Kelly Diehl [00:04:19]

Right? Well, I was in practice, as you mentioned, for quite a long time in all different capacities. I was in private practice and then went back. Got extra training, went to specialty practice. And I think like a lot of people after being there for a long time. I was, you know, kind of tired, I had kids and I was looking to make a change and I had known about Morris Animal Foundation for very, very long time. I learned about them when I was a resident because they were a source of funding when you needed a grant. And that's really one of the first times, though. I can actually remember Dr. Mark Morris Jr. in the 80s, like he was one of the only guys who talked about animal nutrition, and he would come to your vet school and give you nutrition classes because there were no faculty, right? Really involved in small animal nutrition. So, I knew about him, went into practice, would donate to the foundation when I had a patient who had passed away. So that was one of our go-to organizations for that. Then I got a grant from them while I was still in practice. And as I looked to transition it was just a natural fit. They're here in Denver and I really respected the organization and what they did though, even me, till I got into it, I had no idea of the scope of how much money they've invested and our portfolio and that's how I got there. It's been a great fit for me, as a medical writer and communicator, to work for them.

Stacy LeBaron [00:05:42]

So, share a little bit about the programs and the mission of the foundation.

Kelly Diehl [00:05:47]

Absolutely. So I think this is a painful thing to talk about, but I think people are not naive that for years, centuries, animals have been used in experiments. But not to benefit them in any way, and Dr. Mark Morris Sr., our founder really was troubled by that. He was a small, one of the very first people who did small animal veterinary medicine in the United States, right before then it was mixed or large. And he said, you know, I want to start a foundation that is focused on research that benefits animals directly, and right from the get-go, cats were included in the portfolio, was dogs and cats and it moved to horses, llamas, alpacas, wildlife. So we have a really broad portfolio. The whole mission is really funding, really good research that will impact the lives of animals in a positive way and really sometimes focus on diseases that are specific for our pet populations that don't have a human analog, right? That's

where some people get money because they can tie it to a human disease and we've looked at all different kinds of problems will take all comers, you know, come to us with your best proposal and we scrutinize them, we fund globally. So, we have cat studies. For example, right now. We have one in Australia, one in Hong Kong, a lot of course in the United States, in the UK. And so, we'll take, take anything and people come to us, literally, from all around the world to help them study, fund their studies.

Stacy LeBaron [00:05:40]

And the folks that approach you for funding for studies. Are they primarily veterinary students or other as a faculty, you know, or businesses corporate world, where are they coming from?

Kelly Diehl [00:05:46]

The, almost all, of our funding goes to people based at veterinary institutions. Almost all like, really well-known researchers, faculty members partly because they have the wherewithal, we have some pretty strict criteria on, for example, animal use, even if they're people's pets, which is where we're going. We really have put aside purpose, bred animals, right? Studies really need to be done on patients that they're seeing in their hospital or in a petri dish, right? So, we focus on those. We do have some student money part of our mantra is to be training the next generation of veterinary scientists, and we have some student funding, so people can do little projects over the summer, again to try to get veterinary students, interested in veterinary research. And again, it can be any, any species, and that's kind of where we typically find. We do have a few government. We don't do a lot of corporate, we have corporate sponsors, but we don't fund. We're not going to give Purina money. You know what I mean? Or something, but Purina has given us money, which is really nice and will often work work with them. But by far and away, the vast majority of our donations come from regular people.

Stacy LeBaron [00:08:45]

So, before we hit the recording button, you were telling me about a very interesting study that came out with regards to inflammation in cats. You want to share a little bit about that study.

Kelly Diehl [00:08:55]

Yeah, this is really exciting because this is recent a few, several years ago. One of our founders wives, Betty Morris, wanted to honor her husband. Mark Morris Junior, who I mentioned, who is passed, and she set up a very generous funding, a program that funds a senior researcher and really gives them a big boost of money to look at a very specific problem in veterinary medicine. And what we did, she wanted to fund a second one and she wanted to focus on cats. But she goes, you know, what are the problems that are important to people who own cats and to the veterinarian who treat them. And we sent out a survey and we asked people, you know, a bunch of people from our donor base, who own cats and said, what's important to you. What problems do you deal with as a pet owner and the same for veterinarians. What frustrates you? What do you, wish you knew more about? And what came out of that survey was behavior. We really don't know what we need to know about feline behavior and our clients ask us if, about it, and people who own cats are curious. And I think all of us who've owned cats have had cats with behavior problems. I mean, there are a lot, and we all know that behavior problems are why, the number one reason cats end up in shelters and rescues and there it's a major cause of euthanasia, right? It's one of the top causes of euthanasia of pets. So, this made sense to us, and Betty Moore said, yep, let's, let's do a feline behavior and we convened a panel to give us some suggestions like, what are the, some of the top issues and then we put out a call for proposals and we got all kinds. And one, the one that won, I guess, is one out of University of Pennsylvania. They have a quite big behavior section and they wanted to look at how chronic inflammation affects behavior in older cats. And that inflammation could look like arthritis. Like, we're not know tons about osteoarthritis and cats and that would make sense that it would affect behavior as they get older. But also, does it change your cognitive abilities? If you have chronic inflammation, if we control inflammation, can we help cats as they get older? And let's face it like us, they get vague. They can have signs. Like, I've had older kitties that sort of, would wander around, you know, like they have Alzheimer's, right? And I think we are all recognized. They do get these, these issues and it's big like I think with, what's, what are they say? Probably half the cats over 15 years of age suffer from some kind of cognitive change when they get old. And so, this is a fantastic study that's just starting now. Where, these researchers from

University of Pennsylvania will be looking at this and they're actually collaborating with a group in Italy which is really cool too. So it's going to be I think a really exciting study and try to tease out some of this because the idea is, if we know we can intervene and really enhance the life of our elderly cats.

Stacy LeBaron [00:11:58]

That's fantastic. I was actually earlier today listening to a podcast about human people and inflammation and behavior, depression, disease, Alzheimer's dementia ALS and MS. And all these various different diseases that have a relationship with inflammation and how it connects with the gut. And so, you know, one of the things you might end up looking at is, how are the gut issues from, from cats, you know, impacting what's going on in their bodies as it does with people too.

Kelly Diehl [00:12:34]

And we know so little, but if you've ever had a cat, you've probably had a cat that had inflammatory bowel disease, right? It's pretty common in cats and as a gastroenterologist, it was something I saw, it was one of the top things I probably saw in cats. The cats came to me for, with chronic kidney disease also, probably, right? And it would be really exciting. These guys, the thing about this particular award is it helps with people's salary as well as, I mean, it's big and so they have a lot of time to devote to this and they are like looking at a whole bunch of different aspects. So, you're right. It's going to be very, very exciting. And we're happy that we were able to do that for cats.

Kristie [00:13:19]

Give your feline friend protein-packed meals they'll crave with Smalls. Smalls is fresh human grade food for cats delivered, right to your doorstep, so you too can embrace your inner house cat. All cats are obligate carnivores. They need fresh protein packed meals. Conventional cat food is made with profits and mind, using low quality, cheap meat byproducts, grains, and starches coated in artificial flavors. Smalls, on the other paw, is made with cats in mind. Smalls, develops complete, and balanced recipes for all life stages with leading cat nutritionists, starting with human grade ingredients like you or I would find at the market. Smalls recipes are gently cooked to lock in protein, vitamins, minerals, and moisture. No room for fillers. No

need for flavoring. Better quality ingredients mean a better healthier life for your cat. Since switching to Smalls, cats have experienced improved digestion and a less smelly litter box, softer and shinier coats, plus better breath. Try Smalls today, for your cats in your household. Hooch, loved it. Use offer code Community Cats at checkout, for total of thirty percent off your first order at Smalls.com.

Stacy LeBaron [00:14:17]

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 \$10, expert instructors will teach you best practices for trap, neuter and return, TNR. Learn what TNR is and why it works. We will cover getting along with neighbors, preparing 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 Cortis, Neighborhood Cats National program director. To find out the date of the next workshop and sign up, just visit [Communitycatspodcast.com](https://communitycatspodcast.com). 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 Foster Space, powered by our friends at Doobert. Foster Space 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 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. There's so much more to check out. Sign up for free at www.doobert.com and go to the Foster Space tab to get started.

Stacy LeBaron [00:16:24]

Um, you also had mentioned that you have where there was a happy healthy cat campaign at the Morris Animal Foundation and for our listeners, that might not be aware of it. Can you just share what the components of that were?

Kelly Diehl [00:16:35]

Yeah. This was kind of an interesting campaign that was several years ago. I'd actually predated me though. I came in on the tail end of it and it was a campaign that was where the foundation decided to put some kind of focused funding at the family studies that affected the well-being and health and welfare particularly of shelter cats that ended up in shelters or rescues was one arm of it. But what came out of it that I think people have seen is, is there was a very intense push to look at a lot of studies looked at disease in rescues and disease in shelters, right? We know cats that go into shelters often develop upper respiratory infections. I think that's super, super common and they get rid of them. But let's face it. A sneezing snarkily cat is not going to get adopted and this stuff can spread like wildfire, right? And it is something that can really be devil, a rescue or a shelter. And they won a couple of the studies did some really interesting looks at cage space and cage setup. Partly to minimize disease, which actually boiled down to a lot of minimizing stress in these kitties. Because we know these are herpes viruses. So, just like we get cold sores, right? When we're sick or stressed. These cats will break with URIs. And in fact, I have one kitty who, one eye waters, like, go figure that, right, but I've had it in many cats that I've owned. There's always somebody's breaking out URI, right? And one of the things that came out of it that you probably see like if you go to Petco and you see their cages or shelters is the boxes and the tubes right in between and one of our researchers actually pioneered some of that and it was hilarious because she showed us, she has pictures of her welding stuff between cages because she said, I wonder if this cage setup would help. And again that vertical, like if you go in, there's no cages opposite, right? That's probably a no-no. And again, having little boxes, smaller areas, not where they're right in front of us, they can hide; made a huge difference which, you know, some of us with cats go, well, that seems obvious, but it wasn't always obvious, right? I know when I started practicing, it was a bunch of metal cages. Sometimes facing each other, little space. Some tiny little litter box

there, right? And many of what some of the findings that they did have translated very practically into this, they'll also looked at vaccinating cats again, after they break right? In a shelter. And one of the ones from CSU that was really, really interesting, just emphasizes the whole stress piece is they went to the shelter, found cats are sneezing. They're like great, we're going to take them for our study, and I think they got like 30 cats. I'm just kind of spitballing a little bit. But anyway, they bring 30 cats to CSU to do like some studies on upper respiratory infections. These are infectious disease guys, so they're like petri dish and stuff like that, but they need samples. And a third of the cats stop sneezing, simply by going to a new facility that was less stressful for them. And so again, they're like, oh well, okay, we fixed the cats they're not clinical anymore. But it but the point of that is, they wrote it up and they said look how much stress, look how much that influences cats, and how we really need to work on separating cats from dogs. And so some of those things that we just take for granted came from that great happy, healthy cat campaign.

Stacy LeBaron [00:19:57]

Well, and over covid, you know, with all the shelters closing down, and becoming foster based organizations. The amount of disease for cats. I mean, obviously, as well as people, we were, socially distancing and the cats are socially distancing and the upper respiratory levels for cats was way down. So, you know, many groups report there, you know, medication orders, you know, was cut in half or even more so, in a because you still, if you have a diabetic cat, you still have to buy your insulin, but you're not having to buy all the antibiotics and stuff for the upper respiratory, because they're all out in foster care. And so, they've got reduced stress and reduced population.

Kelly Diehl [00:20:35]

Right? Right. Exactly. And I think the CSU group saw that too, surprisingly, they didn't think because they're actually going from one to another, but they had smaller rooms. And fewer cats in there helped. And that helped the shelter Larimer County, you know, kind of re-think how they had stuff.

Stacy LeBaron [00:20:52]

Right? And it gets to thinking, too about like each, each shelter. Like, what's your magic number? Because I definitely get the sense that they're based on the size of the facility and everything. Each organization will say, you know, well, if I'm at 65 cats, this will happen. If I'm at 45, this will happen, you know, if I'm at 25, this will happen. And so, you know, you can sort of find out what your what you're balancing point there and then try and orient your program so that then you're at a certain level of balance, I guess, I would say for the whole group, but I find that I find that really interesting. I have a question for you. Many of our listeners are feral cat trappers or community cat trappers. They feed colonies of cats. They're out there. They're supporting a certainly, a lot of them are also rescuers. They're trapping cats and kittens, and bringing them into rescue and that kind of thing, but from your organization and your experience, what sort of information do you have to share for those that are really compassionate and passionate about our community cats?

Kelly Diehl [00:21:54]

Well, I think that is really difficult question that the foundation is actually trying to tackle as part of the Happy Healthy Cat Campaign. For example, we tried to look at contraception. Didn't pan out. I mean, I'll just say the stuff that and I think that's still a Holy Grail out there, right. For you know, could we have a contraceptive shot? So we're still working on that. I think we did a really interesting study and I'm not sure if it got published, where a gal in Florida, where many of you know, there's some really big, like Maddie's, trying to remember that just escapes you, but Julie Levy worked with a whole bunch of people there, right, who are working on it and we worked with them. Where one of her grad students actually went out and tried to do something completely different, which was the social science study on people who trapped feral cats, and were really passionate about them. And she also interviewed people who were, I mean, it's another side of the coin, which is the people who are like the Audubon Society, right? Concerned about feral cat, populations and birds, and people who have other side which were like, I'm really concerned about feral cats. Like, I'm very concerned and she came up with some algorithms and some commonalities because she said, I need to find something to start the conversation, because this is so antagonistic, this relationship and it was really, really interesting. And they're trying to do some of it in Florida, which has a big feral cat population, right? At the weather is good for feral cats to live outside. And I think we all know

Florida is like the home of invasive species, right? And some people consider feral cats, right? And invasive species. And how do we deal with that? And I think right now that I think a lot of the things that people are doing that are really trying hard to get at this program and problem, and address it in a humane way that doesn't include exterminating, right? Feral cats, is how we have to go and I think that was one of the commonalities that actually, the scouts found is that even in the people who were really concerned about feral cats, killing birds. They didn't want to destroy them, like many of them were like, no, I don't want to do that, but you feel helpless, but I think keeping talking, is important and I really appreciate my parents did that for a while. They had a cat. I think like a lot of people like get a cat, that dumped a bunch of kittens on their basement and they fed this cat and they ended up with quite a few cats and they worked really hard on getting them all sterilized. They actually got a lot of them placed with our neighbors who, I'm sure love them. But, but they got, you know what I mean, to work with that and I think, actually a collective effort and even like people just doing a little bit, the more. The more people that can do a little bit, like fostering can really help, dealing with that. And we haven't done one of those studies in a long time, to be honest with you, is kind of the social science aspects of it. We're moving toward this inflammation study, but it's important for people and people are really passionate about it.

Stacy LeBaron [00:24:41]

One last question I have for you is the question around sort of, as we've gone through covid over the last year and a half. And, and from your organization, what sort of impacts have you seen happen with the veterinary community? During the last 12 to 18 months?

Kelly Diehl [00:24:59]

Well, from our standpoint. The problem is research has ground to a halt in many cases, for us. We have so many people were locked out of their labs. So many people that were doing clinical trials, couldn't get patients in. They're starting to gear up again quite a bit as that schools allow more people but a lot of them are still curbside service, right? So it's really, really impacted our researchers from that's

point. The other thing that we've been getting too, is a lot of questions and concerns about covid and cats, right? And I think we used to go, oh covid isn't going from people to have people, you know, it goes from people to animals and then there's some evidence. Maybe you can get it from certain species and that's caused a lot of anxiety though, I think everybody in our community says, don't get rid of your cat, right? But realize you can actually give it to them. Maybe they can, and give it back and we actually have a study. It's actually in dog's, where they're going to look at banked blood samples to see if dogs seroconverted, even if they had no signs, but you know, the jury still out. I think the sad part was just the lack of research, everything stopped for us. And that was really tough. We kept giving grants in the hopes people could get back in. But many of our researchers were like, sorry, we got nothing to talk to you about because we can't get in.

Stacy LeBaron [00:26:23]

Dr. Deal, If folks are interested in finding out more about the Morris Animal Foundation, how would they do that?

Kelly Diehl [00:26:24]

Sure. I think I would encourage everyone to go to our website, which is one big long word, [Morrisanimalfoundation.org](https://morrisanimalfoundation.org). And what we have on our website is kind of a catalog of all of our studies and you can search by species. So you can see what we've done with cats. We have a blog that addresses all different, kinds of issues, tends to be more focused heavily on dog and cat because in reality, those are our biggest donor base and the most studies we've ever done are dog and cat studies. When you look at total numbers. So we have that we have webinars. We have some videos that have been created that talk about different issues or you can at least learn more about us and definitely about the Mark Morris Jr. Award. We also have done a few years ago. We had a big FIP initiative and that black market drug everybody wants. Well, that was developed through research that we funded and you know, we've done a lot of that was initiative a few years ago. So you can learn all about the study different studies. We found a, you can see what we've got going right now and how we operate a little bit. When we look at cat projects and how we determine who to fund. We always leave, there's always more projects than we have

money, which is sad, we hate to leave them on the table, but you can learn more about what we've done.

Stacy LeBaron [00:27:46]

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

Kelly Diehl [00:27:49]

No, I just really appreciate you, you know, being, having the opportunity to come on and, you know, I would encourage people to look at what we've done and we had people who contact us and go, have you ever thought about this, or whatever? And we have funded in private practice. Like people like me, we have funded organizations as well, who have done research. So it's not without the realm of possibility. If you have an organization that has a good idea to come and seek funding.

Stacy LeBaron [00:28:16]

That's great. Excellent. Well, thank you so much for agreeing to be a guest on the show and I hope we'll have you on again in the future.

Kelly Diehl--- [00:28:23]

That would be great. Thanks so much. Stacy. This was fun.

Stacy LeBaron [00:28:37]

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 Petrie [00:29:25]

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

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