



Vet Care
Express

Animal Ambulance—

Looking Back...Moving Forward

By Candace T. Botha
Photos by Connie Summers

It's been nearly five years since the idea to launch an animal ambulance service in Sarasota and Manatee counties first was conceived by Bradenton resident Cheryl Brady, founder and owner of Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance.

Now approaching 4,000 patient transports since its very first route in June 2010, the animal ambulance services all five of the emergency veterinary clinics in Sarasota and Manatee counties, as well as every veterinary clinic.

Literally, hundreds upon hundreds of lives have been saved, simply because Vet Care Express was on hand to help, providing compassionate and professional care and transport for animals that are ill or injured, as well as those that have passed on.

After just two years of operation, demand for the animal transport service necessitated the addition of a second vehicle. So, Cheryl purchased an actual ambulance that once had been used by Sarasota County for human transport and retrofitted "Big Red" with everything needed to provide emergency care and transport for both large and small animals.

Equipped with portable crates that are secured in place for the easy and safe transfer from home to the vet's office or emergency clinic, Vet Care Express' two ambulances also are fitted with oxygen tanks, pet oxygen masks, a stretcher for large animals and an abundant supply of first-aid supplies.

Since its launch in 2010, Vet Care Express has received multiple awards, including "Best New Pet Business" in Sarasota Pet's Choice Awards and the Natural Choice Awards in 2011, as well as "Best Community Pet Service" by the readers of Sarasota Pet magazine in 2012 and 2013 and Natural Awakenings in 2012.

Cheryl also has been honored for her work at "For the Love of Animals," a local event that recognized outstanding people in the animal community in 2010, and she was recently recognized by ABC 7 News as one of the "Amazing Women of the Suncoast."

Media coverage spotlighting Vet Care Express' service has been extensive and includes feature articles in The Bradenton Herald, Around the Ranch and, of course, Sarasota Pet, as well as on-air interviews with News Channel 8, SNN6 and Bay News 9.

Cheryl also was the featured guest on a recent episode of "Animal Outtakes," hosted by Marsha Panuche on ABC 7.

So, just what is all the hoopla about?

Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance is the first service of its kind in Florida—and perhaps throughout the entire country—that is on call to provide emergency and nonemergency animal transport 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

It was almost 30 years ago that Cheryl first was inspired to write a paper for a business class that detailed the concept of developing an ambulance service for animals. And while Cheryl remembers receiving a good grade on the paper, her college professor did not think the idea would be widely accepted at the time.

A career in Corporate America was the path that Cheryl chose after graduating from college, although finding a life-affirming way to help animals and people was never far from her thoughts.

While in high school and during her first few years at the University of Maryland in College Park, Cheryl worked part time as a veterinary technician and majored in pre-veterinary studies. But, because of the limited number of veterinary schools that were in existence in the 80s, along with a restrictive lottery system that was in place to select potential students, Cheryl's dream of becoming a veterinarian never came to be.

Throughout her career, however, Cheryl found other ways to satisfy a deep-seated desire to help others. For more than five years,

she served as a volunteer firefighter with East Manatee Fire Rescue and was even named "Volunteer of the Year" during her tenure there. She also became an American Red Cross-certified instructor, teaching CPR and first aid for both humans and animals.

Although she was content with her corporate career and her work with the fire department and the American Red Cross, Cheryl still felt that something was missing.

"I started exploring other avenues where I thought God wanted me to be," Cheryl says. "I felt good about what I was doing, and I loved my work, but I still didn't feel like that was 'it'; I knew I was here for something more meaningful."

For Cheryl, the answer finally came a little more than five years ago when she received a frantic phone call from a friend, who had just hit a dog that had bolted into the road while she was driving.

"I raced to the scene to both help and comfort my friend and, as I was driving, I remember wondering, 'What am I prepared to do to help the animal? Where is the nearest emergency hospital? How can I transport the dog safely?'"

Sadly, the dog did not survive the accident. But for Cheryl, that was the moment when the proverbial light bulb went off, and she remembered the concept of the animal ambulance she had detailed in the college paper she had written so many years before.

And in that very instant, Cheryl knew what it was that God wanted her to do.

Taking her concept to completion was no easy task. In fact, it took months and months of planning and preparation that involved first finding, then retrofitting a vehicle that would be properly equipped to provide first aid for animals on the scene, as well as professional transport to veterinary offices and emergency veterinary clinics, when needed. There were countless critical details to consider, including obtaining a license and insurance for a service that had never been available before.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all was marketing the concept to veterinary professionals and residents within the community and proving the value of the service she was ready and willing to provide.

With everything in place, Cheryl left her corporate job and, with the utmost determination, she officially launched Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance.

"Even during the struggles I experienced during the first few months after leaving a high-paying corporate job and while I had



Cheryl Brady, founder and owner of Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance

no income at all, I knew in my heart that I had discovered what I was supposed to be doing," Cheryl says.

Cheryl's perseverance clearly has paid off.

"It has taken several years, but the veterinarians and the emergency veterinarians in our community have established a great system with Vet Care Express that is based on mutual trust," Cheryl comments. "We have built an indispensable network with a shared goal: to provide the very best care for animals in need."

"The veterinary community has realized the importance of our transport service," Cheryl adds; "all of the vets have embraced the concept and understand how valuable this kind of service is."

Since its initial start up, Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance has steadfastly embraced its founding mission, which is to provide "the highest level of reliable, compassionate, professional transport service possible for pets."

At any hour of the day, Vet Care Express is just a phone call away, ready and willing to transport animals that become ill or have been injured to the owner's veterinarian's office or a veterinary ER.

What if a pet owner doesn't have an emergency, but still needs help transporting a pet to a veterinary appointment or to doggy day care, boarding or a day at the grooming spa? Vet Care Express also is on hand to help.

"We have many repeat clients, including elderly or housebound people in our community who are unable or unwilling to drive, or who have physical limitations and just are not capable of moving large pets without assistance," Cheryl comments.

In addition to emergency and nonemergency transport, Vet Care Express also has become an invaluable community resource for the gentle and loving removal of deceased pets from their owners' homes.

"We provide peace of mind for pet owners with pets that have passed at home," Cheryl says. "So many times, people simply do not know what to do or what steps need to be taken. We come in and take care of the animals in the most loving and kind manner and make all of the arrangements, according to the owners' wishes."

While Sarasota and Manatee counties are the primary areas served by Vet Care Express, there have been times when calls from outside county lines have been received and services have been provided.

"Pet owners in desperate need of help in Land O' Lakes, Orlando and other distant cities have found us on the Internet and called us," Cheryl says. "One dog, a 250 pound-Newfoundland with a shattered elbow, needed immediate veterinary care, and his owner was at a



Parked outside the East Manatee Fire & Rescue Department on Lakewood Ranch Boulevard in Bradenton, Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance now has two transport vehicles—the white van, at left, that launched the service and "Big Red," an ambulance once used for human transport in Sarasota County

loss, because the dog was completely immobile. Another dog, a small Yorkie in Orlando that needed oxygen during transport in order to survive, had to be taken to a specialty center in Tampa for treatment.

"We have had numerous oxygen transports—cardiac conditions, collapsed tracheas and cases of pneumonia—that have literally saved lives," Cheryl continues. "We give owners an option to get their pets into the correct specialty care. A lot of these animals only survive because of the fact that oxygen transport via Vet Care Express is available. And, even more importantly, owners don't have to take a chance of losing their pets in their own cars while they are en route to a veterinary clinic."

Perhaps one of Vet Care Express' most important roles in the community is the post-op transport of animals to and from the family veterinary and a 24-hour veterinary care facility.

"There are times that animals need to be monitored through the night, so family veterinarians in our community call Vet Care Express to arrange transport to an appropriate facility that can provide the round-the-clock care that is required," Cheryl says. "These animals are then transported back to the family veterinarian's practice in the morning."

Vet Care Express also can be called upon to transport an animal home following a medical procedure or surgery.

"Animals that have been sedated or might still have a catheter in place are difficult for pet owners to transport without professional assistance," comments Cheryl. "We know how to move these animals safely, and it is far less stressful for the pet owners."

"Giving pet owners peace of mind is what Vet Care Express is all about," she adds.

It's interesting to note that Vet Care Express' patients aren't just limited to dogs and cats.

"We also have transported goats, rabbits and even a large iguana,

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whose owners had no way to bring the reptile to the vet, because his tail alone was more than three feet long!" Cheryl says.

One of the most important developments in the animal ambulance service's relatively short history is a new relationship Cheryl established in the fall of 2014 with East Manatee Fire & Rescue.

Vet Care Express is now on call any time the fire and rescue officials in Manatee County respond to an emergency that involves pets, including home fires and traffic accidents.

"EMS responders do have pet oxygen masks on their trucks, but they are not trained in providing CPR to animals," Cheryl says. "In addition, fire personnel won't leave the scene of an accident or a fire to transport a pet to an emergency veterinary clinic.

"The team at Vet Care Express is specially trained to assess, stabilize and monitor an injured animal, as well as provide immediate transport and oxygen, if necessary," Cheryl adds.

Like humans, animals need ongoing care after they have received oxygen.

"In the past, first responders who treated non-responsive animals with oxygen would send the pets home with their owners once they had been revived," Cheryl says. "But an animal needs to be monitored after receiving oxygen; their lungs potentially could fill up with fluid, and they may begin to experience severe respiratory distress that can be fatal if left untreated."

Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance is, in fact, the first service of its kind in the country to develop this kind of relationship and work hand in hand with a fire and rescue department to provide EMS services for pets.

In the near future, Cheryl hopes to set up a similar program in Sarasota County.

Pet owners throughout the area have expressed both support and gratitude for Vet Care Express. Countless testimonials published on Vet Care Express' website, www.vetcareexpress.com, attest to the compassion and kindness shown by the Vet Care Express team that now includes Randy Bryant, who has worked full time with the animal ambulance since May 2014, and Kathy Cassoday, who has been on board for more than two years. Carmen "Lumi" Nunez, Cheryl's wife, also is an invaluable part of the team when extra help is needed to transport animals.

Despite the numerous accolades and publicity she has received, Cheryl believes that many area residents still are not yet aware of the services that the animal ambulance provides.

In fact, Cheryl estimates that as many as 85 to 95 percent of pet owners in our area don't know that the animal ambulance transport service exists. Her hope is that word of mouth from veterinarians and grateful pet owners will continue to make Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance a household name in every home in Sarasota and Manatee counties.

Despite limited local awareness, word about the services provided by Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance has reached other parts of the country.

"I frequently get phone calls from people throughout the United States who are interested in starting a similar service in their communities," Cheryl says.

Last month, in fact, Cheryl received news that a well-known television producer who currently is the mastermind behind the "The Incredible Dr. Pol"—a popular documentary film series about a small town veterinarian and his Central Michigan practice that airs on the National Geographic channel—was interested in meeting Cheryl. With fingers crossed, she hopes that the producer will develop a series that not only spotlights her services, but also will eventually air on Animal Planet, National Geographic or the Discovery Channel.

In the meantime, Cheryl has set several very feasible goals for the next five years.

"My hope is to bring Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance to counties throughout the state of Florida," Cheryl says. "It is going to take a good business plan, supportive partners and possible investors that believe in the importance of the transport service and want to be a part of it.

"We already have established a "Proud Supporters Program" of area pet businesses that want to be both top notch and cutting edge and who

also want us to be involved with their clients' pets," Cheryl continues. "In appreciation of their support, we have posted their business names on the doors of 'Big Red.'

"Community residents—and eventually state residents—need to know that we are available; we are here; we are a community resource," Cheryl adds. "Calling Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance is just like calling 9-1-1 for humans; it's the same exact resource for family pets."

Looking back over the growth Vet Care Express has experienced during the past four years, Cheryl feels both blessed and grateful that she, indeed, has found her calling.

"The most gratifying part of the business is knowing that we are helping animals and their owners," she says. "We get to touch people's lives in a positive way every day. We are very thankful that we are able to help in a way that never before existed.

"The need is there," Cheryl adds; "if we have proven nothing else, we have proven that." 🐾

Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for both emergency and non-emergency transports. For more information or to arrange a transport, call 941-592-5131, or visit Vet Care Express online at www.vetcareexpress.com.



Above, from left to right: Randy Bryant, Cheryl Brady and Kathy Cassoday of Vet Care Express Animal Ambulance

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