The Healing Power of Pets: Fostering Wellness Through Rescue Transcript

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Show Introduction and Guest Welcome

Welcome to Energize and Revitalize with Dr. Amy. I'm Dr Amy Cooper-Smith, a doctorate prepared nurse practitioner. And this show is about empowering you to live a radiant, healthy, and balanced life.

Very excited to introduce today's guest, Caroline Johnson, the founder of Smart Pet Rescue. Our co-host today is Otis, who will be helping us talk about this very exciting, important issue.

So since 2022, Smarter Flagler County has been dedicated to rescuing, caring for, and rehoming dogs in need. So welcome and thank you so much for being here today.

Thank you, Dr. Amy. I'm so happy to be here. It's a great time of year for us and celebrating a lot of success stories and adoption. Happy to share about it.

Oh, wonderful. So tell us about the Pet Rescue. How did it begin and what inspired you to start this venture? After coming down here, working in mental health for my young adult years, had a car accident, came down for better weather, just arthritis kind of stuff.

So I thought sun would make that better, right? So immediately boredom sets in. You're not working and doing much. I started helping out with the lost pets in the area, which at the time was very minimal because we were a smaller community.

It was about 16 years ago.

How Smart Pet Rescue Began

So when I came down so not not such a big population and more seniors at the time So as it grew, you know, I started helping out volunteering at The Humane Society Helping with those lost pets to reunite with owners And it's kind of progressed into me doing adoptions for the shelter as a volunteer for years I then started in 22 just so we can help and have more reach in the community and You know, we'd pick up a dog hit by a car, nowhere to take it, no funds.

So the organization really started with that in mind, with when you find a dogs, if there's an emergency or even a family that has a pet emergency but they can't afford, you know that two or three thousand dollar bill, how can we help them more?

You don't just find lost dogs and abandoned dogs, but you are a resource for people that, like you said, have pets. It's funny because SMART started as an organization while I was still volunteering for the shelter.

I started it more so for the dogs from the lost pet page that needed emergency care and for families who really needed it. Because I was doing this for roughly ten years already and helping families that really need it, somebody make a post online.

With having that following already, I would step in and try to raise emergency funds. But you don't really have much reach if you do not have an organization, because a lot of fundraising efforts, businesses that want to help, they need to be able to write it off for taxes.

So there's just much more reach with it being an organizations. Did not start it as a rescue per se. But things evolve as they tend to do. It evolved within two or three weeks and we had dogs in foster.

So I'm very happy about it. I am happy how it's growing. The team effort that's there, the support from so many that

love the animals and love their efforts and the mission.

An amazing organization filled with so many animal lovers and, you know, if you can't foster, some people just want to donate and help with the medical.

Some people don't have the funds to donate, but they rather foster and helps save a life. You know some, people can do either of those. So, why not come out and volunteer at an event to help get them as opted.

And, so, many small businesses locally that really step in to us. It's been great watching it grow. That's so wonderful. So what kinds of situations can lead to an animal needing to be re-homed?

You know, we see so many stories now. With the high rise in cost of everything, a lot of families can't even afford food themselves, let alone to take care of animals.

When you're faced with do you pay your rent or do pay vet bills or your mortgage, the dogs have to go if it means you know you are facing foreclosure or eviction because you lost a job and can afford.

A lot of divorce. A lotta divorce we see. The unfortunate part about that is a lotta families with that dispute and anger that comes after a divorce, neither one of them want the dogs.

And, you know, so we try. Um, the most heartfelt one is when you see somebody get a terminal illness. We get, a lot a seniors reach out to us.

When Pets Need Rehoming

That don't want to see their fur baby that they might have had for 10 years end up in a in A kennel or in the shelter environment They're concerned about euthanasia, especially if it's a senior dog So we'll step in and help with a family like that That's kind of a priority outside of the abused dog piece of it, which is our top priority the next would be helping the seniors who are going into an assisted living or have a terminal illness because they don' really have options most of them don t even have family locally So somebody who is in a situation, whatever it is, whether it's health, finances, they cannot take care of their animal anymore.

They can call you. And we are doing our best to help most of them. The need right now is more than we can keep up with. We're a small foster-based organization.

Until we have a facility where we house the animals, we're limited to who fosters. And that's hard, because some of the dogs, especially if they're abused or dumped, you don't know background.

So, the ones coming from home, you know, from like a senior who has a terminal illness, they get to know a little more about the dog, so it helps us to place them quicker.

But an abused or dumped dog who needs love and rehab and to learn to trust again, that's hard. So we're doing our best to help raising donations, to helps with vet emergencies.

We'll always make courtesy posts to try to raise the funds. It's hard. If we can keep the pet in the home by helping them raise funds for an emergency and cover the vetting versus them surrendering, that's a better option for that dog, the family, and for everybody all around.

So we will do our best. We can't take in as many dogs as we get messages for, but we try. we do out best So what is involved in fostering? It's the most rewarding thing.

Fostering is really, ideally you're taking mostly the abuse and the dumped is what we take in. So you take an abused soul that just really needs to learn to love again.

Some of them have never known gentle touch or regular feedings every day. some of the have been starved. You

just want to really work through those issues with them and teach them that how to be a dog again and a happy dog and you know we cover all the vetting, the supplies, we covered everything that's needed financially because we don't want it to burden on a family.

We're happy that they're at least opening their home and their heart. So it's really just being helping socialize them, helping them acclimate. If there's little issues or training issues that you can assist with, then help.

if there is major issues, that need help of a trainer, we will get trainers locally to help with that foster and the dog. So it really is just a stepping stone for that dog, if you will, of somebody to them transition to a place where they're adoptable.

So if that makes sense. Now, do the people who are providing the fostering, did they need training so that they know how to deal with an emotionally damaged animal?

You know, for not training per se, because really it's a matter of, I mean, just opening your heart, right? And being nurturing. So most of the fosters are familiar and have had pets before, have pets now.

It's no different than you did with your own, but it's recognizing signs that, you know, things that might be a little trigger for a dog. You know if a dogs has been hit before and you notice when you raise your hands, he's cowering and hiding.

It is finding little ways to work around those things and teach them that when do that reward them when they're not hiding take them out on walks in places where they see other dogs and people and can interact and see that nobody's going to hurt them.

So it really is not training per se. It's just, you know, some safety things that we'll go over if it's a new foster. You know if a trainer is needed because there's more of a severe case of abuse that's where we will get trainers involved and try to help.

them teach the foster how to really handle those situations. And for the most part, I mean, we've had really good luck. We haven't had any incidents of, you know, a foster being injured by a dog or, um, another pet in the home, per se.

Most of them are happy to be safe, happy be in a place where they can be loved, and happy being eating because some of the have went weeks or months without food, so it's…

It's just a matter of really treating them no different than your own.

Fostering and Helping Abused Dogs Heal

And so you mentioned somebody could have a pet and still foster, and that actually can help the foster dog. Yes, absolutely. You know, when it comes down to scared dogs, it's like kids, right?

You take an abused kid and put them with other kids who are loving and nurturing to them. It helps them, especially if it was an adult that abused. So it's the same concept with the dogs.

One dog, like Otis, Otus is amazing at sensing another dog's energy and fear. We have a dog that I'm fostering at the house now who was dumped out of a car just last week.

She was dumped out of a car. The person opened the trunk, dumped her, pulled off, and then she was hit by another car right after. This poor girl has been through so much already.

You can see where her collar was embedded and the fur outside of it grew over. So no telling what kind of suffering she's been though. She's cautious and she has a right to be.

But she, you know, immediately when I brought her home, do slow introductions on leash with them just to read body language and see kind of how they do.

Otis can read them immediately. He's like perfect at it. I mean, he's he sensed her fear in her body, language, and he just immediately rolled over belly up.

like in a submissive way. And honestly, Dr. Amy, it's amazing to watch another dog go to help another. It's the case with most dogs. I have a pack at home myself that really opens up and is very warm and loving to the dogs that come in that need it most.

So it is amazing. All right. So speaking of people, if somebody has a dog and it's just not working out, There are places they can go that aren't on the side of the street.

Do what's right. I get it. Shelters are full. Rescues, like myself, are overwhelmed because we're taking the burden of shelters being full and people needing to surrender or dumping them.

I think, you know, it's, take them somewhere. Take them to a vet's office and tell them, listen, I just cannot keep this dog, animal control, anybody.

But don't dump them on the road because Lady, the one we just took in, thank God, they carted and hit her very hard. We had to do full x-rays and a lot to make sure that she is okay.

That could have been fatal for her. Her recovery back into normal home now is compounded with the fact that she's injured absolutely well and you know not just that but how many times do we see on the news you Know a loose dog ran up and attacked a kid or you?

Know another dog walking with their owner You know and a dog runs up an attack so there's so many scenarios that can take place that are not good you, know when you dump a, dog and Let's say that dog attacked a kid when she dumped him.

That person is responsible for that. The dogs ultimately suffer, right? And the kid is attacked, but because of somebody's bad choice. There's always an option.

Dumping them and doing something harmful should never be an options. And we make an agreement when we bring a pet into our home that they're with us until they are not on this earth anymore and we are responsible.

Absolutely. I'm gonna have you hold that thought. We're gonna pause for a break from our sponsor. You're listening to Energize and Revitalize with Dr.

Amy. Don't go anywhere, we'll be right back. Welcome back to energized and revitalized with dr. amy. I am Dr Amy Cooper-Smith and my guest today is Caroline Johnson from Smart Pet Rescue.

And we have Otis here who's falling asleep on the job. He'll pitch in at the, at, the end. Yeah. Give a little bark saying, thank you. So before the break, we were talking about the mission you have at smart and how you've, you rescue certain animals and, but I want to kind of touch on why we should have animals in our life.

Um, there's a lot of research that shows that having a pet increases well-being for humans. And so what has your experience been?

Why People Should Never Dump Pets

You know, it's, there's been so many studies done, but talking to people and having the pets yourself is the best study, right? That, I mean, you look at a dog like Otis, sometimes I can come home, Dr.

Amy, from one of the worst rescue days of, dogs pass away, hit by car, whatever. They sense your energy, they

sense you stress, and they know when you're sick, I think people just underestimate how much, you know, power there is in these little fur babies and their instinct, and the love and nurturing they give.

So, on a stressful day or after a long work day, I thing to be able to come home to a wagon tail, whether it be dog, cat, to know to home home the loving and a nurturing of a pet, Kind of helps you decompress it it It gives you a different kind of love that even humans can't give you you know a loyalty a love and a nurturing that it just I walk into a room sometimes to do a presentation and I'll bring Otis and it Just changes the entire vibe and feeling in the room.

You know, so there's seniors there seniors right now out there or or even just adults that don't have family in town per se or not close to their family, might be alone.

And you'll see them and talk to them or they'll adopt a dog and they will tell you that it was just the best decision they ever made, the most life changing.

You know, we adopted to somebody that has some severe depression in his life and went through, you know being in the military and some PTSD. Dr. Amy, him and his dog, they go everywhere together.

The change that it made in his life, he said, is something he can't even put into words. So I think emotionally, it just has a way of uplifting when we need it most.

I have dogs that like to cuddle. And so if I'm ever having a bad day, I just get a little cuddles fest going on. Makes everything better. Some kisses, some smelly kisses.

It makes everything better. It does. And they're always happy. Every time I come in the room. Yeah. They'll never disappoint. Like I said, they really have the ability, and some more than others.

I mean, people get emotional support pets and service dogs. Some are better at others than in reading. You know, I've been sick. We went through our bouts a few years ago, right, with everybody getting COVID.

And I had a knee surgery where I got blood clots. My cocker spaniel knew it immediately, almost like alerted me.

The Wellness Benefits of Pets

And if I wasn't attentive to that, I mean, honestly, it probably saved my life. So I think in just so many ways, probably one of the best parts of life is having a pet.

And there are some breeds of dog too that can be trained to sense blood sugar changes and seizure and all kinds of of things that a properly trained dog could, can be a medical assistant.

Absolutely. And you know what? And without medical, it just, at the end of a day, like I said, a long day or, or you're retired and just have a lot of time on your hands.

Um, uh, and having a dog at home with you or travel with, you and go out with your places, our running partner, I can, they can honestly change everything.

Yep. And studies have shown that owning a pet can reduce your cortisol levels. That's the stress hormone. Um, it also boosts oxytocin, which is the feel good hormone inside.

We're changing having absolutely being pet owners. So do you think owning pets actually helps people increase their physical activity as well? Yes, I mean it it on it's going to push you even on days that you don't feel like getting up to go walking or to Go out you have to now you'll have this little one or two or if you're like me four or five dogs at home that keep you very active and and moving even when you Don't Feel like it and Honestly, and again, that physical goes right back to the mood, right?

Because if you're feeling out, down and just not feeling yourself or emotionally, physically in any way, um, That dog pushing you to get up and move can actually change not just the physical, but the mode as well.

Um, so I think definitely, you know, being active, going for walks, You know you have to, get them feed them. So it's gonna get you moving for sure. Now you mentioned you, have five dogs.

I shouldn't be saying that, but yes. You are running this organization and you are very active in the community, raising awareness and collecting funds so that you can help these animals.

How do you stay grounded doing all of that? Exactly what we just said by having the love of the dogs. I mean, I, you know, try to take time for myself.

It's hard, running the organization and running county's lost pet page on top of organization. It doesn't leave me much time to sometimes feel grounded.

But like I said, after a long day, you get Otis that senses it and will lay like he's laying in my lap now and come and cuddle. And it just helps me to decompress at the end of the day.

It really does. So you mentioned the last pet page. So you've been known to be out at all hours tracking down lost pets. So tell us about that. How does that work?

So the Lost Pet page is on Facebook. It's kind of run over to other apps, like Nextdoor now, where they're posted there too. But most people, when they see a loose dog or cat or have lost a pet, will post on social media.

And nine times out of 10, there's Facebook groups where their posting. The Lost pet page, simply for that, Am tagged probably 150 times a day about loose or lost dogs It has grown when I took over the page many years ago once or twice a week and now that is sometimes The amount of dogs now is is insane.

How many? Cats is a little different. We don't We don't really go out searching for cats because there's groups and community cats and people that help out with the cats, so we stick more to the dogs.

But there are a lot of cats posted as well. It's hard to really know, and especially if you're not experienced with cats. Some of them are indoor-outdoor cats some have slipped out of a house and some just live outdoors.

I would never know the difference, I leave that to professionals that deal with that. The dogs, honestly Dr. Amy, it's every day. So usually, I'll help them be a resource with going out and searching.

We have humane traps that are built like a crate, right? And it's automatic triggers when the dog steps on a plate that the the dogs will go in and be locked in the trap.

So for a dog that we can't catch that is lost or dumped, we'll use a trap and we will set up cameras so we know when that dog goes in. You know, if a family lost a pet, we'll help them get signs up in the area, lost dog signs.

Lost Pet Searches and Community Volunteers

Usually if you lose a pat, you're kind of in anxiety mode and don't really know where to begin, especially if it's never happened to you before. So I think just kind being a resource and helping them and understanding, putting up the flyers is most crucial because people see the dog and have a number of calls right in front of them.

So, being a resource, I'll take dogs out like Otis with me that are submissive to catch a lost dog that is scared. Nine times out of 10 if you have a dog with you, they'll come up to you versus being by yourself.

So I did not know that. Yes. Most people feel like you know their dog is very social and go up to anybody right because you Know your dog as being the happy playful love everybody dog at home when they get lost And they're out loose and can't find home.

It's a different dog. You know, their anxiety kicks in Their fear of everybody and every car kicks and so having something that's familiar to them like another dog It just kind of helps them trust you a little more to help catch them.

I Do you have people that help you with the search and rescue? Yeah, I mean, a lot of people on the page help and assist, and it's amazing. Really, if we have a dog that's lost, the community kicks in into overdrive.

It's an amazing thing to watch. So we do have team of volunteers. We're all volunteers, so we'll go out and help with a lots of that. A lot the trapping and stuff, there's just a handful of us that do that, we can always use the support of more people.

Um, but yeah, it's, It really is a group effort. A lot of volunteers, um, you know, just helping being kind of boots on the ground. Sometimes with those searches, we have to go into wooded lots and do, You know some, some heavy searching and in wood sometimes at night being out.

So having more than just myself is, is good. And we. Have a great community for it, honestly. That's fabulous. Even with our own wellness, volunteering, actually helps enhance wellness and being part of an effort, the community.

So I think there's so much that can help us just be healthier, happier people. And we help the animals too. I love it. The volunteers are crucial for us to get what we do.

Not just on the lost pet page, but in rescue. We set up and do the events that we or even just our adoption events at PetSmart and Tractor Supply let us set-up and get the dogs adopted.

How many volunteers I have dictates how many dogs I can bring out because I cannot manage everything by myself. So even if somebody wants a volunteer just coming out to do that and help getting them adopted, it's a great time.

It's really no work involved. You're just there mingling with the dogs. play with the dog for an afternoon, get your oxytocin levels up. I love it. And especially for the people that can't foster because they have a dog that might not be good with other dogs or so, you can still come out and help out with getting them adopted.

It's a great time. So wonderful. How do people find out about your events, what you're up to and how they can get involved? Either our Facebook page of Smarter Flagler County on Facebook, or a lot of it is on our website, smartflagler.com.

So yeah, if you head over there, you'll see all of our upcoming events. Events is crucial for us, Dr. Amy, because we don't get any funding city or county at this point.

Everything is donation-based and fundraiser- based. In order for to really cover all the vet costs and the need, the smart van, rescue van and supplies, we have to do events, We host usually an event, usually once a month at least.

Events, Donations, and Closing Remarks

So some of them small, some bigger. Hopefully everybody will check them out on our website. Yes, and they can participate. You need volunteers to help with the event.

Absolutely. And of course donations. There's a link on your page. Well, I want to thank you for being here. And I wanna thank Otis for our being our great co-host today and sleeping with his face buried.

Yeah. So cozy. Um, so we'll post everything on our, on out site too, our page and hopefully you'll get some more volunteers and some help. Absolutely.

Thank you. I appreciate you, Dr. Amy and your support. Okay. Thanks to our listeners for tuning in to Energize and

Revitalize with Dr Amy. If there are topics you would like to hear about, please send an email to radiantpodcasts2025 at gmail.com.

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It really helps us reach more listeners just like you. I'll be back next Saturday morning at 730 with more expert insights and practical strategies to help you live your healthiest, most energized life.

Until then, stay healthy and here's to your best life.