

# BEHAVIOR'S BEST

## A Talk with Tara Lang, BS, RVT

Andrea Vardaro  
Veterinary Learning Systems

**F**or Tara Lang, BS, RVT, spreading the word about behavior is one of her main career goals. She believes that awareness of behavioral issues and prevention of problems strengthens the human-animal bond and decreases the likelihood that the pets will be unnecessarily surrendered or euthanized.

Behavior is so important to Tara that in 2003 she founded Critter Communications, LLC, a consulting firm that offers puppy classes and in-home behavior modification services to veterinary clinics in the southeast Missouri area. Critter Communications also provides behavior services, Web site maintenance, and computer software and hardware maintenance for AnimalBehavior.Net, which supplies animal behavior education and resources to pet owners and veterinary professionals.

Tara gives us a glimpse into the fascinating world of animal behavior.

### What led you to specialize in the area of behavior?

When I worked in an exotic animal practice in Atlanta, I did a lot of client education, most of which seemed to focus on behavior. I also realized that I had an affinity for birds. The more I learned about birds, the more I realized that many of them had behavior problems, primarily screaming, biting,

and feather picking. Very few people in the practice wanted to tackle bird behavior, so I took on the challenge. My employer paid for my continuing education, and I focused solely on exotic medicine and behavior at several national meetings. The rest, as they say, is history.

### Tell us how you started your consulting business.

After my daughter was born, I began doing more work from home. I honed



With Karlie's help, Tara demonstrates the use of the "Calming Cap," a new behavior product distributed by Premier that helps calm pets by reducing their field of vision.

my writing and computer skills and took some Web design classes. When my family moved to Missouri, I began working as an independent contractor, editing and writing for AnimalBehavior.Net and its founder, Dr. Rolan Tripp. However, because my community had a lot of pets that needed help, I decided to also begin consulting for veterinarians in the area. Because I knew I could work with lots of different "critters," and because behavior medicine is all about communication, I

Travis Duncan

## Vital Statistics

### CURRENT EMPLOYMENT

Veterinary behavior technician and consultant, Critter Communications, LLC, Cape Girardeau, MO; Relief technician, Animal Health Center, Sikeston, MO

### EDUCATION

BS in Agriculture with a concentration in Animal Health Technology and an Equine minor, Murray State University, Murray, KY (1995)

### PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians (corresponding secretary and president-elect), NAVTA (past member-at-large), Missouri Veterinary Technician Association (member)

### PETS

Sydney, a blue-tongued skink; Grover, a 35-year-old blue front Amazon; and Bart, a 15-year-old cherry-headed conure. Karlie, the 11-year-old Great Pyrenees that is featured on our cover, sadly passed away on Easter Sunday.

### LEISURE

Tara likes to spend most of her free time with her husband, Kerry, and 4½-year-old daughter, Jacquelyn. Tara also enjoys skiing, painting, woodworking, and do-it-yourself home projects.

SEND

your comments to [Web: VetTechJournal.com/VT\\_2-2.html](http://Web: VetTechJournal.com/VT_2-2.html) [Email: editor@VetTechJournal.com](mailto:editor@VetTechJournal.com) [Fax: 800-556-3288](tel:800-556-3288)

decided to call my business Critter Communications, LLC.

**High-quality care for all of these "critters" is important to you.**

Oh, yes. No matter the size or cost of the pet, it should be offered the best care possible because it is someone's friend. Exotic and small mammal pets are just as important as any dog or cat. I don't think enough attention is given to their normal and abnormal behaviors; therefore, this is one of my favorite topics to lecture on at meetings.

**Describe your consulting job.**

I accept referrals from nearby veterinarians to assist their clients with behavior modification, including phone consultations, troubleshooting, and occasionally in-home visits. A local dog trainer and I do a lot of public education, including speaking at daycare centers about dog bite prevention. We're also very excited to be embarking on a research project for cancer scent detection using dogs.

I still manage the Web site, write articles, and handle communications for AnimalBehavior.Net. I also train veterinary staff, pet supplies store personnel, and other pet professionals on how to implement a range of behavior services in their facilities. In my spare time, I answer behavior questions on a local morning radio show, visit neighborhood schools for career days, and lecture on animal behavior to the community.

**Tell us about the owner-assisted adoption program you work with.**

Many owners who want to rehome their pets don't want to take them to a shelter. Owner-assisted adoption makes every attempt to keep the pet in the owner's home until it can be adopted. We evaluate the pet's temperament and make suggestions that the owner can live with until the pet is adopted. We also make sure the pet has been to a veterinarian and is current on vaccinations. We then work with a local no-kill shelter to place

**Inspiration Breeds Success**

Tara credits her strong, supportive family with mentoring her and inspiring her to succeed.

"My Grandpa Jack taught me the most about life and that I could do anything I set my heart to," says Tara, who named her daughter Jacquelyn after Jack and another of Jacquelyn's great-grandfathers, Lynn. An animal lover just like her mom, Jacquelyn, or Jacqui, has already shown the strength of character that so many of Tara's family members possess. Less than a week after the cover photo was shot, Karlie lost a 7-week battle with bone cancer. Tara says, "Losing a pet never gets any easier, but the toughest part was telling Jacqui that her dear friend was going to die. After a long talk, Jacqui and I decided that Easter was the day to end Karlie's suffering."

Tara has been particularly inspired by her sister Gretchen, who was diagnosed with a debilitating illness that left her paralyzed a few months before her wedding. Her determination to walk down the aisle prevailed, and she now has a happy marriage and healthy 5-year-old son. Unfortunately, just before Christmas, Gretchen was diagnosed with a pancreatic tumor. Tara's family and friends have banded together to form a support system for Gretchen and her family while she recovers from surgery. "I know she will put on her brave face, go home and cuddle up with her son, and be as strong as any other mother," Tara says. "She is one remarkable lady!"



The Long Family

▲ Unaware of the magnitude of the situation at hand, 4½-year-old Jacqui relaxes on the grass with Karlie before saying good-bye to her.

the pet on PetFinder.com and get the word out that it is up for adoption. Then we interview potential new owners and make the best match. We look for an owner who is most likely to provide the pet with a safe, permanent home.

**How do you help pet owners understand the concepts related to animal behavior?**

I use experiences with my daughter and her friends to explain things in terms that clients can understand. For instance, it seems all children are potty trained slightly differently and at different ages. When owners are having difficulty with housebreaking

their pets, I mention this. Unfortunately, when you talk to preschool mothers about "housebreaking" their kids, it doesn't go over quite as well!

**Describe your most fascinating case.**

I have an ongoing case concerning one very smart cat that was attacking his owners any time they would take out a suitcase. The clients have dedicated a huge amount of time to behavior modification for this cat, and today he is like a different animal. He jumps on and off things on command, and he has mastered "come" better than most dogs. Best of all, the owners can now pack for a trip without being attacked!

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## SMELLS BE GONE

In our April issue, we asked how you handle nasty odors in your clinic. Here are some of your responses:

We make our own air freshener by combining 2 cups of water, 1 tablespoon of vinegar, and 1 teaspoon of baking soda in a spray bottle. To remove pet stains and odors from carpets and bedding, use a 1:1 vinegar:water solution. To remove smoke and vomit odors from the air, pour some vinegar in a shallow dish. Soak litter pans in vinegar to absorb urine odors.

*Amanda Daum, RVT  
Edmond, OK*

At our clinic, large fecal samples and materials used to express anal glands are put in a covered garbage can in the back kennel area. We also spray an all-natural

odor neutralizer called X-0 in the exam rooms between each appointment. When setting up fecal floats, we set the worst smelling ones under a fan hood.

*Tiffany Bates, CVT  
Iron River, WI*

To combat the nasty odor that comes from anal glands, we spray witch hazel in the air and on the animal's hind end. It neutralizes the odor rather than masking it with heavy deodorant sprays.

*Kerri Hammond, LVT  
Oswego, NY*

When nasty odors arise at our clinic, we usually mop up with a bleach solution that neutralizes the odor and then use Cat-Off to spray the area. The combination of the two takes care of the odor and

leaves the room smelling clean for the next client.

*Emily Jax, CVT  
Kenosha, WI*

We spray Febreze fabric refresher on all of our rugs and chairs in the lobby. It makes the entire room smell nice for quite a while.

*Dana Johnston, RVT  
Seattle, WA*

We have installed Air Wick misters in different areas around the clinic that are set to go off every few minutes. Available in many different scents, the misters provide a nice, constant, fresh scent without a lot of effort.

*Jamie Spaulding, CVT  
Corvallis, OR*

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**You've been extremely active with the Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians (SVBT). Explain what your role is in the organization.**

My experience with NAVTA inspired me to start the SVBT scholarship committee. Currently, I serve as president-elect, am chair of the publications committee, assist with the newsletter, and maintain the Web site.

However, I couldn't do it without the support of the other officers. Our membership is growing stronger each year, and we will celebrate our 5-year anniversary this September in St. Louis, where we are cohosting our first continuing education meeting with the Jefferson Community College NAVTA student chapter. The American College of Veterinary Behaviorists and American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior continue to be supportive as well, and we can't thank them enough.

**We understand the SVBT is trying to obtain specialty recognition from NAVTA.**

SVBT has appointed a group of well-respected technicians in the behavior field to be the organizing committee for the Academy of Veterinary Behavior

Technicians (AVBT). They are working to set up the academy, which is now a separate organization from SVBT; however, SVBT is giving the academy its full support.

Unfortunately, recognition will not occur as quickly as many of us hope. The field of veterinary behavior is in its infancy. The AVBT organizing committee is made up of credentialed technicians who have at least 5 years of clinical experience with 75% of their time spent in behavior. I currently have 3 years of experience working in behavior over 75% of the time. When I was in general practice, I was only able to focus on behavior 50% of the time. Realistically, AVBT needs more technicians with this experience who are willing to spend an enormous amount of volunteer time working on all the requirements needed to obtain specialty status. Right now, they are spread very thin and there is more work than there are people to do it.

**What skills are most useful to you as a behavior technician?**

I've always been very empathic, which I think is an extremely valuable

trait when dealing with individuals and the fate of their pets. I am also a very good listener and am able to tease out all the fine details of a case. This is important in an area like veterinary behavior, in which clients are not educated on what is normal and abnormal.

Another important skill I've developed is public speaking. Client education in the exam room, the public speaking my mother made me do as a Girl Scout, and the several school plays I have narrated prepared me for lecturing to my peers at state and national conventions.

**What are the most important things you've learned from working in the behavior field?**

You really need to get to know your clients and patients so that you can teach them in the way they learn best. You can't try to teach someone by phone if he is a visual learner or expect a client who is an auditory learner to just "get it" from an email. Be flexible in your teaching methods, and listen very closely to what your clients expect from you and what they want for their pets. **VI**