

a mission of
hope and
healing

HSUS program brings free vet care to Indian reservations, where geography and economics deliver a one-two punch to struggling—but compassionate—pet owners

by ANGELA MOXLEY

The line began snaking through the desert even before the blazing August sun breached the horizon. It was 7 a.m., and the people of the Fort McDermitt Indian Reservation were already waiting.

They weren't clamoring to buy the latest video game console or eagerly anticipating the grand opening of a popular coffee chain. In this remote Nevada community where the residents eke out a living as farmers and ranchers—where the nearest veterinarian is an hour away, and money can't easily be diverted from groceries to gas—the people arrived carrying makeshift leashes and hearts full of hope. They were responding to a luxurious proposition from the Field Services division of the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association: free vet care for their beloved pets.



Clinic founder Eric Davis prepares for a castration operation on Red, a working quarterhorse brought to the McDermitt clinic by Danny Snapp and his family. A skilled surgeon with a specialty in treating horses, Davis made do with his surroundings: He spread sheets on the ground and went to work, encircled by a crowd of onlookers—including students eager to soak up his teaching.

At the head of the line was Delora Snapp, who'd brought five of her dogs—with six more still at home. The first had shown up on her property months before, perhaps dumped there by someone who knew of her soft spot for animals in need. Soon Mama had a litter of puppies, and then her puppies started having puppies. Before long, Snapp was looking after nearly a dozen animals, some of them born with deformities, such as Club, named for the curvature in his right front paw.

The dogs also began experiencing travails common to many of the reservation's free-roaming pets. One returned from his wanderings with a bloody head wound, probably incurred during a fight with other dogs. Another came home with quills embedded in her skin, acquired during a tango with a porcupine. Saddened by the suffering and worried that more puppies might be on the way, Snapp came to the clinic seeking a path out of her predicament.

Within a few hours, all but one of the dogs were in the temporary care of HSVMA workers, after lead veterinarian Kate Kuzminski and staff member Tammy Rouse offered to assess those left behind at Snapp's mobile home just down the road. "Wow, you're a dog

whisperer, ma'am," said Kuzminski as she watched the skittish animals, who'd been dozing in the shade, nuzzle up to Snapp. "Well," Snapp responded between gentle murmurs, "they get attention all the time—they get spoiled."

Though the dogs weren't socialized enough to make good adoption candidates, Snapp agreed to have them spayed and neutered. It was another small step forward in a 14-year effort to help stop the cycle of breeding and alleviate the suffering endemic to such isolated areas—one animal, one person at a time.

A LAND OF LITTLE OPPORTUNITY

Snapp's dogs were just a few of the nearly 6,000 animals treated by HSVMA staff on Indian reservations this year. Tens of thousands more have received millions of dollars in free services since 1995, when veterinarian Eric Davis started the clinics as an offshoot of a program that provided human medical aid in rural areas with high poverty levels and few services. Mesmerized by the model of teaching students in real-life settings and serving people in need, Davis soon found the project taking over his life, and he left a university teaching

position to do the work full-time.

“I don’t see my profession as a job; I see it as a cause,” said Davis, who’d driven through the night to McDermitt from a previous clinic in Washington State, towing a horse trailer filled with meticulously organized, color-coded supplies. “Convincing [people] to put more effort into the care of their animals is best done by going there and showing them what can be done, showing them that somebody cares, and making it affordable.”

On the last of this summer’s 15 tours of tribal lands, Davis led a convoy of veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and students through a stark landscape of rodeos, casinos, and sand-colored mountains. There, they saw plenty of evidence of animals’ hard-scrabble lives: the horse whose family had tried to castrate him without anesthesia, the scrawny dog wandering the streets with an oozing eye and a rope around her neck, the puppies who’d been left at the dump one bitter cold January day.

“This is not a cushy gig,” Kuzminski told the team upon arrival in McDermitt. She was speaking from experience, having sold her own Ontario practice in 2005 to devote her career to helping people and pets in underserved areas. “My two pieces of advice for you are eat when you can and sleep when you can. You are going to learn so much about veterinary medicine and surgery, but you are going to learn a lot more about yourself and life on this trip. So embrace it.”

The bleary-eyed crew members hadn’t even completed orientation when the first clients appeared at the McDermitt clinic. The night before, they’d already exhausted themselves transforming an empty gym into a fully functioning animal hospital complete with surgery tables, anesthesia equipment, a tent for escape-minded felines, and dozens of caddies stocked with vaccines and syringes. But the work had just begun. They labored well into the evening before crashing for the night on the hard floor of the senior center or next to the cages of the clinic’s overnight guests. And for the next eight days on their visits to three reservations of the Shoshone and Paiute Indian tribes, they would get up before dawn to do it all over again.

Beyond the tales of death and despair recounted by clients, the



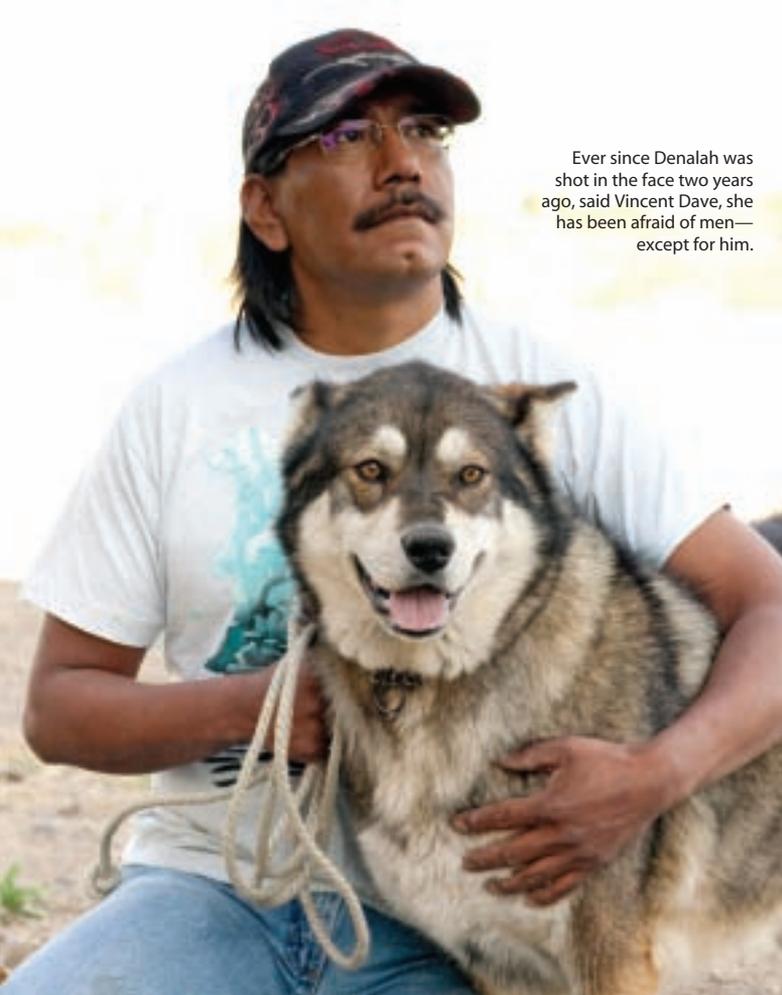
Students helped nearly 400 animals on the nine-day Nevada trip, completing 170 spay/neuter surgeries and administering vaccines, dewormers, and flea medicine.



Fort McDermitt resident Delora Snapp soothes Club before he heads into surgery.

veterinary team would also witness something far more hopeful: the woman who’d actually taken in some of those puppies abandoned at the dump; another woman who’d sheltered two other discarded pups with a makeshift cardboard shade as they took their dying breaths among rubbish; the couple who’d driven three hours to have their pets spayed and neutered, leaving home at sunrise and not returning until after sundown.

One of the most welcome surprises of the trip was the 3-year-old husky mix in such good shape that volunteer veterinarian Bill Pomper pronounced her body condition ideal. With guesses abounding at the clinic on everything from pets’ ages to the dates of their last shots, the husky’s owner was a relative fountain of data, armed with a spay certificate, microchip information, and vaccination records. Wanting to help an animal in need, Vincent Dave had adopted Denalah from the Nevada Humane Society, and she’s now the head of his four-dog pack, enjoying her own doghouse and



Ever since Denalah was shot in the face two years ago, said Vincent Dave, she has been afraid of men—except for him.

tennis ball and reveling in hair brushing sessions and snow tubing excursions.

Denalah's attentive care has not made her immune to the perils of the reservation. Two years ago, she was hiking off-leash with Dave and his wife when she crested a hill out of sight and someone shot her in the face. "She ran about a mile and a half up the canyon, and I tracked her down," Dave said. "After I finally caught up to her, she let me pick her up and carry her to the truck." The next day, he drove Denalah 200 miles to the vet for jaw surgery.

The unfriendly fire is not uncommon in McDermitt and the other two reservations that HSVMA visited on the Nevada trip, Duck Valley and Duck Water. In these desolate settings, free-roaming animals encounter illnesses like parvo, collisions with cars, and injuries inflicted by other animals. With no access to preventive medicines, animals pick up parasites from horse manure or mange from ticks in the sagebrush. Dogs battle each other for survival in the harsh winters, making meager meals of squirrels on the range and eating cheap dog food from coffee cans in the backyard. Many work 10 to 12 hours a day herding cattle.

Indian reservations are not bound by federal and state animal cruelty laws, preventing tribal police officers such as McDermitt's Jesus Palomo from doing anything for starving or continuously chained dogs. And with no shelters or animal control officers on many of the reservations HSVMA visits, animals may die as grittily as they lived. Palomo said his partner has often shot dogs, the most merciful method available for ending animal suffering: "They get hurt, they're out there walking around, and you got to put them down."

Public health fears have caused some tribes to adopt inhumane animal control policies. At Duck Valley, a tribal law allows the trapping and shooting of animals deemed threatening, said resident Paula Whiterock, whose own dogs have been shot in disputes with the housing authority.

Whiterock is frequently summoned to pick up litters from the town dump, and she once took time off work to rescue puppies about to be buried alive in a pit of metal waste. She also takes in animals from people who say the landfill is their only option.

Whiterock has driven animals to city shelters, hoping they will at least be humanely euthanized, if not adopted. But the visit often comes with a surrender fee and a lecture about how the already crowded shelters just don't have the space for rez dogs.

"It's really frustrating," Whiterock said. "For a while there ... I thought about giving up. But then you see [the animals], and they're just hopeless."

HEAL, TEACH, INSPIRE

HSVMA workers have encountered problems like these in many of the communities they've visited, from Latin America to Pacific island nations to the hills of Appalachia. Such remote areas can't easily overcome the barriers to a better quality of life, said HSVMA veterinary technician Windi Wojdak, who works from dawn to dusk overseeing the bustling anesthesia area and conjuring meals for famished volunteers from a smattering of random ingredients.

As the director of U.S. programs for HSVMA Field Services, Wojdak has seen enough locals lined up at 6 a.m. to know how desperately many of them want to help their pets. But the economic and geographic isolation is too great for most. "There is a common misperception that the animal welfare problems in one place or



Veterinarian Kate Kuzminski examines Skippy with the help of Oregon State University vet student Paul Brady.

In a matter of hours, the gym at the Fort McDermitt community center was transformed into an animal hospital. Students divided into groups, some overseeing the initial exams and others working the anesthesia table, while the rest received valuable one-on-one time with the surgeons. The setup enabled them to perform surgery and manage cases from start to finish, an opportunity rarely offered in vet school. While they are closely supervised by experienced vets, Kate Kuzminski, the lead veterinarian on the Nevada trip, noted that "they are responsible; they make the call; they get to use their vet brain. They will learn more in this week than they will in months at school."



On the Road for **Pets** and **People in Need**

Veterinarian Eric Davis founded the clinics in 1995 as an offshoot of the Remote Area Medical program for people in underserved regions. In 2001, the program became part of The HSUS and changed its name to Rural Area Veterinary Services. When The HSUS joined forces with the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights in 2008, the clinics became part of the newly formed Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association.

In addition to the nearly 6,000 animals treated this year on Indian reservations, HSVMA Field Services helped more than 1,600 animals in Central America and Pacific island nations. The value of services provided totaled \$1.18 million, including more than \$700,000 for vaccines and medicines.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, including how you can help, visit hsvma.org.

another are the result of some specific cultural beliefs about the value of animals,” she said, “when in reality it all comes down to access.”

In areas with few or no options for vet care, medical treatment for animals is often an unfamiliar concept. But through the fine art of gentle persuasion, HSVMA staff are slowly instilling a new perspective.

At Duck Valley, the team met a gentle cattle dog named Chewey, who'd been limping from a pellet gun wound received the year before. The vets decided to amputate her leg but said the dog would have to sleep indoors during recovery. Initially resistant to the idea of having an animal in the house, owner April Rose forged a compromise, offering to make a saddle shed into Chewey's nighttime quarters. “I don't want to see her hurt,” Rose said as she stroked the

dog, nestled in the grass outside the tribal fire station where the clinic had set up shop. “My grandson loves to roll around with her. ... When she got [shot], he sat with her and held her head.”

When another dog with a mangled leg was brought to a recent clinic, staff members had an even tougher message to deliver to the homeless family who'd been keeping him in a truck bed and feeding him all they had to give—potatoes. Because it was clear that his caretakers lacked the resources to see the dog through his recovery following a leg amputation, Rouse, the clinic's receiving coordinator, was charged with persuading the family to give him up.

A longtime employee who met Davis in 1997 when she organized a clinic in a doublewide trailer in rural Tennessee, Rouse serves as the face of the clinics and knows her clients well. HSVMA would rehome the dog, she told the owner, before issuing this simple but successful plea: “Sister, you know this is the right thing to do.”

After a few visits like these, many clients begin to emulate what they see in the clinics. Even in places with no organized animal groups, Wojdak said there is a noticeable difference in the level of animal care after they've visited for a number of years. “When you first start going to a community like that, you never see a dog that's more than 2, maybe 3 years old,” she said. “Now we get animals back for vaccines who are 6, 7 years old, and we spayed them four years ago.”

With a long list of communities requesting clinics, HSVMA can't visit them all as frequently as needed to maintain the health of the animal population, so the program supplies resources during the time between visits. When the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota struggled to control a severe outbreak of sarcoptic mange, clinic staff gave the community health officer medication to treat animals year-round. As a result, the mange problem virtually disappeared.

At Duck Valley, Whiterock has been seeking resources to start a shelter, a clinic, or a relationship with a mobile spay/neuter unit. Such locally driven provisions for veterinary treatment are the best-case



“She just looked like she had no life in her; her head was hung,” Susan Wilkinson said of the wayward dog she noticed on the side of the road after dropping off some pets at HSVMA's Fort McDermitt clinic. Veterinarian Kate Kuzminski later encountered the stray animal when she drove down the road seeking cell phone reception. Moved by her scrawny appearance and weeping eye, Kuzminski grabbed the rope around her neck, loaded her in the car, and took her back to the clinic (above, left and center). Now living with University of California Davis vet student Jenica Wycoff, Delilah Rose McDermitt the First is enjoying her new home (above, right)—and sisterhood with Wycoff's two cats.



Six-month-old Kitty gets a checkup from Emily Conway, a fourth-year student at the University of Glasgow. The 30 other students on the Nevada trip traveled from 11 vet schools in the U.S. and Canada.

scenario, said Wojdak; the animals benefit from more regular care, and HSVMA staff can redirect their efforts to more desperate areas.

During previous HSVMA trips to the Red Lake reservation in Minnesota, conditions were “really rough,” said Wojdak. “We saw a lot of sick animals, and none had vet care. The people who were doing rescue were overwhelmed and hopeless. They didn’t see a way out.”

Inspired by HSVMA’s example, the group has built a small shelter and periodically hosts a spay/neuter clinic. Through networking with other shelters in the region, local advocates are also finding homes for more animals. The community has turned a corner, and “this year, we’re not going back,” said Wojdak.

But in other areas, there’s still no shortage of work to be done and—judging from the number of volunteer applications HSVMA receives—no shortage of future veterinarians interested in doing it. Even when Wojdak posts the annual call for applications unannounced, late on a weeknight, she gets responses almost immediately. She accepts 1,000 applications for only 300 slots. “The program is

much more popular and in demand with students than we could possibly accommodate,” she said.

Some students return from the reservations with a burning conviction that work in remote communities is their life’s calling, having gained far more knowledge than a textbook could ever provide. “As students, we learn the academic way to practice—and then there’s the actual, real world, financially limited way to practice,” said HSVMA intern Jena Valdez, a fourth-year student at Colorado State. “As veterinarians, our job is to give all the options, but I feel that it is also to come up with things that are realistic for what the client is actually able to do.”

Some, like University of California Davis student Jenica Wycoff, go home with more than they’d bargained for: a living reminder of the animals and people who try to make do without even the most basic services. At the end of the trip, the scrawny dog with the rope around her neck and oozing eye accompanied Wycoff back to California, where, Wycoff reports, Delilah Rose McDermitt the First has “adjusted very well to her new city girl life.” ■