

On the Road With Cheryl Brady of Vet Care Express

By Candace T. Botha

For as long as she can remember, animals have been an important part of Cheryl Brady's life.

Born and raised in Maryland, Cheryl always had a family dog, and in the Bradenton home where she now resides, there are two cherished canine companions—Maggie, a three-and-a-half-year-old, pure-bred Golden Retriever, and Hannah, a six-year-old Shepherd/Chow mix that was rescued from Bishop Animal Shelter.

But having dogs of her own never quite seemed to be enough for Cheryl. From the time she was a young girl, she always wanted, somehow, to be involved in helping to take care of animals.

It wasn't until after spending more than

animal ambulance service that provides both emergency and non emergency transport 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Both simple and straightforward, the mission of Vet Care Express is to provide "the highest level of reliable, compassionate, professional transport service possible for pets."

"Vet Care Express is here to serve pet owners and the pet community," Cheryl says. "We offer an affordable means of transportation to help people take their

She has developed relationships with area veterinarians and established a partnership with

Sarasota Veterinary Emergency Hospital (SVEH), providing complimentary animal ambulance transport for the South Tamiami Trail practice that recently be-



came a 24-hour emergency and critical care facility. According to Cheryl, SVEH is the only clinic of its kind in the country that she has found that provides this type of ambulance service for its clients.

For animal lovers in the midst of a traumatic situation with an ill or injured pet, Vet Care Express is just a phone call away, providing speedy transport—day or night—to and from a family veterinarian or a veterinary emergency clinic.

Vet Care Express

also is on call for non emergency pet transport, an especially handy service for people with large dogs, the elderly and 9-to-5 employers and employees, as well as for pet owners who are disabled or do not have transportation, cannot drive or are uncomfortable driving at night. (Please see the sidebar on page 25 for a complete list of non emergency transport services Vet Care Express provides.)

Since initiating the ambulance service six months ago, there have been times



Above, Vet Care Express' ambulance is fully equipped, licensed and insured and has been carefully retrofitted to provide first aid on the scene and professional transport to a veterinarian's office or emergency clinic. At left, Cheryl Brady, owner of Vet Care Express, and her Golden Retriever, Maggie. Photos by Connie Summers



two decades in the corporate world, however, that an unexpected turn of events and an unavoidable tragedy offered Cheryl the opportunity she had longed for since childhood.

A major career change and a new concept in animal care, coupled with healthy doses of determination and motivation, led Cheryl to launch Vet Care Express, an

pets where they need to go."

Perhaps even more importantly, Cheryl is on call to help save lives. Since first starting the ambulance service for animals, Vet Care Express has played a pivotal role in turning potential tragedies into happy endings, earning the respect and gratitude of both pet owners and veterinarians in our community.

To carry out Vet Care Express' mission, Cheryl has purchased and retrofitted a fully equipped, licensed and insured transport vehicle.

Animal Ambulance Service Offers Peace of Mind & Skilled, Compassionate Care

when Cheryl even has been called to transport an animal after it has passed.

"Several months ago, I received a call from the owner of a St. Bernard," Cheryl recalls. "The 130-pound dog had suffered a massive heart attack, and his owner could not move him.

"After I arrived and secured the dog in the ambulance, I performed CPR, but it was too late," Cheryl continues. "So, we took the dog to the emergency clinic so cremation could be arranged.

"The client later said, 'I know this sounds funny, but you guys are lifesavers; I had no idea what I was going to do,'" Cheryl adds.

Although dogs and cats are her most frequent patients, Cheryl will transport any pet that is containerized, including birds and reptiles.

The idea to launch an animal ambulance service first occurred to

Cheryl more than 25 years ago, when she had to write a paper on innovative ideas for a business class.

the field. Her initial plan was to pursue a career as a veterinarian.

As a student at the University of Maryland in College Park, Cheryl majored in pre-veterinary studies. But attending veterinary school just wasn't meant to be.

"At the time, there were very few veterinary schools in the country, so there was

ager at a sporting goods store. She then made the move into the corporate world, where she was employed by Federal Express for 12 years, working as a courier for a decade before transitioning into sales. She then moved up the corporate ladder to do high-end contract sales for Boise Office Solutions, a multinational distributor of office and technology products that purchased Office Max five years ago.

In 2002, Cheryl relocated to Florida with the company as a sales executive in contract sales, a position she held until November 2009.

Two years after moving to Florida, Cheryl became a volunteer firefighter in Manatee County. For the past five and a half years, she has attended training classes on Monday nights and volunteers

as her work schedule allows. Cheryl also achieved notable success in corporate sales after the relocation; she built a \$4 to \$5 million territory for the company. Her accomplishments, however, did not



Pictured above, Cheryl Brady, owner of Vet Care Express (far right) and the staff of Sarasota Veterinary Emergency Hospital, including Ashley Kanzler, DVM, Ilonka Ambrose, DVM, Nicole Kennedy, DVM, Wendy Ellis, DVM, owner of the practice, and Reagan McDonald, DVM. Vet Care Express has partnered with Sarasota Veterinary Emergency Hospital, providing complimentary transport back to a pet's family veterinarian after emergency care. Photo by Connie Summers

a lottery system that was used to decide who was accepted into the program," Cheryl recalls. "Even with several years of

sales after the relocation; she built a \$4 to \$5 million territory for the company. Her accomplishments, however, did not

“ Sarasota Veterinary Emergency Hospital has really set a new standard. It is the only emergency veterinary clinic in the country I have found that is providing complimentary animal ambulance services for its clients. ”

"I remember writing about the advantages of an ambulance service for animals," Cheryl recalls. "I did get a good grade on the research paper, but my professor didn't think it was a feasible idea back then."

During her senior year in high school and her first couple of years of college, Cheryl worked part-time as a veterinary technician to gain valuable experience in

vet tech experience and a high GPA, selection was based solely on the luck of the draw."

Cheryl then switched her focus to human medicine, taking courses in medical technology.

After graduating from the university with a degree in general studies, Cheryl chose not to pursue a medical career, but began working in retail, serving as a man-

make her immune to a major corporate "realignment" that would eliminate a large percentage of the sales force at the company by the end of 2009.

Fortunately, Cheryl was aware of the direction in which the company was headed months in advance, so she was able to prepare for the inevitable: eventual unemployment.

It was, however, a haunting incident that occurred 13 months before her employment ended that unexpectedly gave Cheryl a new vision and purpose for her future.

"A friend of mine accidentally hit a dog when it unexpectedly ran under the back wheels of the truck she was driving," Cheryl says. "The dog was killed instantly."

Vet Care Express'

Affordable One-Way or Round Trip Non Emergency Transport

- 🐾 **Annual Veterinary Exams** 🐾 **Appointments with Veterinary Specialists**
- 🐾 **Grooming Appointments** 🐾 **Transport to & from a pet sitter**
- 🐾 **Transfer to a veterinary clinic for overnight observation**
- 🐾 **Transport to & from day care and/or boarding facilities**

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As Cheryl rushed to the scene to be with her friend, a myriad of questions raced through her mind; “How am I going to help the dog?” “Where is the closest vet’s office?” “What can I do to comfort my friend?”

And then—suddenly and clearly—the final, most enlightening question of all came to Cheryl: “How is it that an emergency transport system for injured or ill animals still does not exist?”

“My friend was, of course, devastated by the accident, but I knew right away that there was a purpose in what had happened,” Cheryl says with conviction. “Literally, light bulbs started going off in my head. Within 30 minutes of the accident, I remembered the paper I had written in college about starting an animal ambulance service. Then and there, I knew I had to do this.”

Cheryl credits her friend’s accident with instantly changing her own journey in life. And, just as suddenly, there was much to be done.

“All last year, I spent time after work and every free moment, every weekend and every holiday compiling information and getting prepped,” Cheryl adds.

She also sought out advice and assistance from professionals in the local pet community.

“Terri Nagle, practice manager of Animal ER at University Park, was instrumental in helping me, offering advice, sharing first-aid supply resources and guiding me in selecting the right equipment for the ambulance,” Cheryl says; “she was so generous with her time.”

To gain additional knowledge and skill, Cheryl—who already had experience teaching Pet CPR and First Aid for the Manatee County chapter of the American Red Cross—spent time and observed at Animal ER at University Park.

“I just knew this is where I was supposed to be,” she says.

Cheryl also took a class offered by the Red Cross to learn how to properly handle injured or ill animals, and she attended the Florida Veterinary Medical Association Conference, where she enrolled in seminars on emergency medicine and transport.

Cheryl has since provided in-service training in Pet CPR and First Aid for veterinary offices, pet resorts and pet sitting companies and is available for in-house seminars upon request.

It was Labor Day Weekend in 2009 that Cheryl took a monumental step in moving closer to realizing her vision: she completed retrofitting the van she would use to transport animals.

With the help of one of the firefighters with whom she worked, Cheryl custom-

system, complete with the addresses of all area veterinarians; towels; and a gurney. Another always-on-board essential: a jug of ice water for heat-stroke patients.

Last month, Cheryl also installed strobe lights in the front and back of the ambulance so that other drivers are aware that an emergency vehicle is in transit.

Once the ambulance met Cheryl’s exacting specifications, an even more challenging task needed to be addressed: How would she let the veterinary community and area pet owners know about the services she was now equipped to provide?

Cheryl began to make the rounds to veterinary offices in Sarasota and Manatee counties, speaking with the vets or their practice managers and leaving behind displays with rack cards and magnets.

Her visits to area veterinarians quickly began to spread the word. Recently, a woman who lived alone on five acres needed help transporting her German Shepherd after its legs had gone out. The pet owner had to wait all day for her neighbor to come home to get the dog inside. She then called her veterinarian, who recommended Vet Care Express to assist her in transporting the dog to the vet’s office.

Cheryl also has developed working relationships with both veterinary emergency clinics in Sarasota: the Animal ER at University Park, just off University Parkway in Cooper Creek, and SVEH, located on South Tamiami Trail.

In fact, she established a partnership with SVEH this past July to provide complimentary ambulance transport back to the pet’s family veterinarian following emergency care. She also is offering ambulance transport to SVEH or back home for a nominal fee.

Animal ambulance transport insures the highest level of professional care in a safe, fully equipped vehicle designed for pets, while providing peace of mind for pet owners.

“SVEH really sets a new standard by establishing a professional team approach in providing Sarasota and surrounding communities with the very highest level of veterinary care,” Cheryl says.

As part of her marketing efforts, Cheryl



The interior of Vet Care Express’ ambulance includes pop-out crates that can be carried into a veterinary office, a portable gurney, first-aid supplies, pet oxygen masks and an oxygen tank—all designed to provide safe and professional animal care during transport. Photos by Connie Summers



ized the van, first with cages that could quickly clamp in and then pop out for easy transfer of her patients into a veterinarian’s office. She also stocked the van with first-aid supplies; pet oxygen masks; an oxygen tank; a stretcher; a ramp; a GPS

has developed important relationships with 911 emergency systems in both of the counties she serves.

"There have been many times when anxious pet owners do not know who to contact when their animals experience medical emergencies, so they call 911," Cheryl says. "Now, 911 operators in both counties say, 'Here is a number you can call for immediate help.'"

Since launching the animal ambulance service six months ago, Vet Care Express has received impressive media coverage.

Features about the animal ambulance service have recently appeared on News Channel 8, SNN6 and Bay News 9, as well as in the *Bradenton Herald*. (Links to reports and articles, as well as testimonials, can be found online at www.vetcareexpress.com.)

For Cheryl and her assistant, Carmen Nunez, there are three critical priorities in the transport of every pet.

"What's most important is to handle the animal carefully, compassionately and correctly and to deliver him or her into a professional's hands as quickly as possible," she says.

"Proper handling of a pet if it is sick or injured is every bit as important as it is with humans," Cheryl adds. "The first five minutes are especially critical; because they are so small, there is so much that can go wrong."

Her extensive training and experience has taught Cheryl to caution pet owners to call for help and to refrain from moving a pet if it is traumatically injured or is sick and cannot stand or walk on its own.

"Pets, like people, need to be handled with the utmost care in a timely manner and with the proper equipment," Cheryl says. "My response is immediate; I handle the emergency first."

Although Cheryl can administer first aid to injured animals, she cannot, by law, provide any kind of veterinary care to ill or injured pets.

"My role is to evaluate the patient and bundle the pet properly for transport," Cheryl says. "I can check the gum color and 'refill time' (the time it takes for the gum color to return to its natural pink

color) to determine how critical the injury or illness is, and I can check the animal's breathing rate and temperature.

"Once the animal is secured in the ambulance, I call ahead to the veterinary clinic or emergency hospital to advise them of the patient's condition and our estimated arrival time," Cheryl adds.

But what about the cost? Most people would assume that this kind of 'round-the-clock, personalized service is expensive. However, Vet Care Express' rates are extremely affordable, starting at around \$30.



Above, Cheryl relaxes at home with her own two dogs, Hannah and Maggie.

Photo by Connie Summers

"I offer a quote that is fair for both the client and the business," Cheryl says. "I don't want any decision on transporting a pet for medical care to be made based on money. All decisions should take into consideration what is best for the animal, which is why Vet Care Express has made it affordable for community residents and veterinary clinics to use our services.

"When our pets are hurting or suffering, we want them to be handled with kid gloves and with compassion," Cheryl adds. "If your pet suddenly becomes ill or is seriously injured, you need somebody there with training in First Aid and CPR to help provide proper, skilled care for your pet."

Equally important to Cheryl is providing care, comfort and compassion to the pet owners, who often are confused, worried or, at times, in a state of shock. They also don't want to cause their pets additional injury or pain.

"We have gotten more hugs, expressions of thanks and gratitude and 'God Bless You's,'" Cheryl says with a smile. "This has given me far more joy than I ever experienced in the 22 years I worked in

the corporate world, because it is serving a purpose and helping others, both the animals and their owners."

While there is much joy in Cheryl's work, there also have been moments of sadness, when Cheryl knows that a beloved pet must finally be put down.

"These trips are sad for me, but I know that we are at least doing all we can to make it as comforting as possible for both the pet and the owner," she says.

For Cheryl, every step along her new journey, even those filled with heartbreak, has been worth it.

"Through all the years I spent in Corporate America, I knew I wasn't in the right place," Cheryl says. "I always was looking for my calling.

"There comes a time when you know you are where you're supposed to be," she adds. "The very first critical patient we transported was a dog named Scooby. I held his paw while Carmen was driving, and I couldn't help but cry, because I just knew.

"We really were instrumental in saving Scooby's life," Cheryl adds. "Since then, we have helped save the lives of many other animals, and that's the difference this kind of service can make."

Calls at all hours of the day and night come with the territory when operating an animal ambulance service 24/7. But even those late night/early morning calls offer Cheryl affirmation that she, indeed, has found her calling.

"When the phone rings in the middle of the night, I jump right up, and I'm ready to go," Cheryl says. "It's easy to do, because I have a purpose."

With long hours spent either on the road or awake in the middle of the night, does Cheryl ever get weary?

"Yes, I'll admit that there are times when I am tired," Cheryl says. "But it's a really, really good kind of tired." ❁

Vet Care Express' animal ambulance services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for both emergency or non emergency needs. For additional information, please call 941-592-5131, or visit www.VetCareExpress.com.