

# 10 Powerful Lesbian Veterinarians

Where to take your loveable Fido or Fluffy. **By Jamie Anderson**

Don't take Fluffy or Mr. Snake to just any veterinarian—take your beloved pet to a sister. Here are some of the top queer women vets in the U.S. Inspired by reality TV shows, childhood pets and visits to the zoo, they come from all walks of life. They work in academia, for the government, at zoos and in private practice, using conventional medicine, acupuncture and kisses on the head. (Fluffy's head, usually, but some of them practice with their partners, so there's that kind of kissing, too.) Even if you've got a cranky mare with a toothache—or a rhino in need of insemination—we've got a doc for you.

## 1 Julie Teresa Garnier, Washington, D.C.

Since the age of 5, it's been her dream to be a veterinarian. Dr. Garnier worked at Zoo Atlanta and the San Diego Zoo, specializing in exotics, zoo animals and wildlife medicine, before moving to the D.C. area to work with small animals. She currently has a position with the Food and Drug Administration, although she continues to work as a relief vet at several practices. In her spare time, she renovates homes, travels internationally and spends time with her partner, Charlene, their two kids and their French bulldog. She's also on the board of Rainbow Families D.C., an organization for LGBT parents.

## 2 Carolyn VandeWiele, Indiana and Michigan

Also a relief vet, Dr. VandeWiele treats cats, dogs and the occasional "pocket pet." As a kid, she wanted to be a sailor, but later changed her mind, partly because neighbors took her on a behind-the-scenes tour of the Bronx Zoo and the New York City Aquarium when she was a young girl. There are many success stories in her nearly 23 years of practice, but the patient that is closest to her heart is Cindy, the little dog with chocolate brown eyes who was hit by a car. Cindy endured several surgeries, including the amputation of a rear leg. The owner never returned, so Dr. VandeWiele took her home. "For the next 13 years or so, she traveled with me everywhere that she could come." Sadly, Cindy passed away recently, but she will always be remembered as an inspiration to many people, their pets and the vet who took her home.

## 3 Diane Dodin, Chicago, Ill.

Like many of us, Dr. Dodin has always loved animals. After watching surgical shows on TV with her dad, she realized that she wanted to become a vet. One of her most challenging patients was a dog with intestinal obstructions. With the help of a colleague, she performed a surgery that she had done only once before, in vet school. After having a foot of intestine

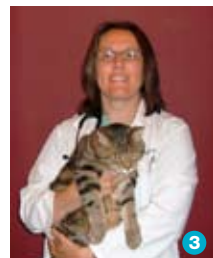
removed, the pooch was soon back to his old self. In addition to treating cats and dogs at Urban Veterinary Care, she volunteers at the Red Door Animal Shelter, a no-kill shelter.

## 4 Erin Perotti-Orcutt, Seattle, Wash.

"Animals will heal if they can—in spite of us, sometimes. My job is to help them if they need it, and to empower their humans to understand what's going on, what their choices are...so they feel able to make a choice." Dr. Perotti-Orcutt currently runs a hospital with her partner, Paige. "I'm really happy to have a profession that I can combine with being a small-business owner. It's a huge plus right now, as the mother of a young child. Paige and I can make our own schedules... and still support our family. I love that we can work together." She loves her patients and their owners, too. "I have amazing clients, and I also have the good fortune to practice in one of Seattle's lesbian meccas, so I get to talk to many brilliant, gorgeous sisters every day."

## 5 Jan Walsh, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Dr. Walsh works at two different clinics and sometimes makes house calls—often to perform acupuncture. One of her favorite patients is a poodle who suffers from seizures and receives a mixture of Western and Eastern



JENNA PROMISEL (ORCUTT), TRACY WALKER (WALSH), SUSAN REICH (SCHAFER), BELINDA ANN HALL (DARROW/MCCOY)

## A Purrfect Career

medicine. “This seven-pound dog was vicious, twisting in all directions, screaming bloody murder, when I first began to treat him. Now he...falls asleep on my lap during his treatments.” She has no plans to stop doing the job she loves. “I want women to know that it is never too late to...pursue their passion. Twenty years and I still enjoy what I do.”

### Karyn Harrell, Chapel Hill, N.C.

6 Dr. Harrell works in an academic setting, specializing in internal medicine. “We are very involved with our patients and our clients... often more than other medical professions.” One of her favorite patients was a young Great Dane who had swallowed a plastic toy. His owners couldn’t afford extensive surgery, so it was Dr. Harrell’s job to get it out with an endoscope. Luckily, the procedure was a success, considering euthanasia would have been the only other answer. “I cannot even tell you how happy I was to be able to loop the end of our retrieval device around a little blue plastic hand and pull that big plastic duck out!”

### Mari Morimoto, New York, N.Y.

7 Dr. Morimoto, who identifies as queer, stands in for vets who are away. When asked what she loves and hates about her job, she says, “The joy of watching patients who first walked in your door as a puppy or kitten grow up, but also sadness when they reach the end of their lives.” Because she’s USDA accredited, she helps clients prepare for international travel with their pets. She is fluent in Japanese and helps many Japanese nationals expedite the export procedure and minimize the time their pets spend in quarantine. She’s also an active member of LGVMA (the LGBT Veterinary Medical Association) and the transgender and gender nonconformist community in NYC.

### Karen Kowalski, Cincinnati, Ohio

8 After working as a trauma nurse, Dr. Kowalski decided she needed a change, so she went back to school to become a vet. She has now been practicing for 22 years. She spends most of her days making house calls, treating cats and dogs. “I have the best job in the world—I love getting up and going to work. The people I meet are awesome and so are my patients.”

### Nan Schaffer, Chicago, Ill.

If you happen to have a rhino, contact Dr. Schaffer. She’s a vet who specializes in the reproductive problems of rhinos and is

As a cat veterinarian, non-profit worker and the co-author of *Crazy Cat People*, out lesbian K. Kelly Jones has always had a special relationship with animals.

“As a child, I would drag home any animal I could find and try to nurse it back to health,” she says. “I really wanted to do something that had meaning and purpose to it.”

But it was her particular love of feline-kind that led to Jones’ collaboration, with her brother, Skot, on *Crazy*.

The book is written from the perspective of cats living in the cat hospital where Jones works. The characters are based on real cats and their stories are loosely based on real events. The book includes whimsical illustrations by Carlos Sandoval and every chapter includes practical vet advice by Jones.

For young women looking to enter the male-dominated veterinary field, Jones’ advice is clear: “Study very hard. It is extremely difficult to get into veterinary school. You need to do something that makes you stand out from all the others. Also do things like volunteer at a zoo or shelter, or get a part-time job working at a veterinary

clinic. This will demonstrate to them that you have an interest in animals and are willing to do entry-level jobs.”

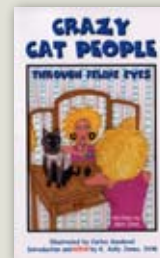
Jones herself is no stranger to giving. Working as a vet, she realized that animals were often left behind when women left abusive relationships, so she started a non-profit called Pets in Crisis—an organization that provides refuge for pets while abused women seek help in shelters.

“Studies show that a large percentage of women will delay leaving or refuse to leave an abusive situation if they have to leave their pet behind,” she states. “Almost all of the animals that we have cared for have been abused. It is sad to see how they react to us initially; they don’t trust [us] and they are nervous and scared. However, it is amazing to see how they respond to us after a few days of love and safety. They have such a strong desire to love and to be loved in spite of what has happened to them in the past.”

So, what is Jones’ number one piece of advice when

it comes to caring for your favorite feline?

“It would have to be nutrition. Cats are carnivores and their bodies cannot efficiently digest or metabolize things like corn, beets, soy, and wheat. So, when we add these things to their diet, it



often gets stored as fat. I try to encourage cat owners to read labels and select food for their cat that is high in meat protein (not by-products), with very few fillers and a short ingredient list. Just because food is a name-brand, doesn’t mean it is good for your cat.”  
[Lisa Gunther]

9 the founder and president of SOS Rhino (sosrhino.org), a nonprofit that works internationally to preserve the five rhinoceros species in their natural habitat. When an organization once offered to give her an award for being a notable lesbian and mentor, she reacted with amusement. “Ha, right, that was a laugh. I could see some young dyke going to her mother and saying, ‘I got it Mom, I want to jack off rhinos when I grow up.’ Poor thing—as if she wasn’t confused already. They gave the award to me anyway.”

### Lenice McCoy and Bess Darrow, Gainesville, Fla.

Doctors McCoy and Darrow met at an *L Word* party when both were at a vet school in the Caribbean. McCoy now works at an

emergency clinic where she treats family pets. What does she love best about her job? “Kissing my patients on the head.”

If you think having a cavity is hard on you, try dealing with a 1,200-pound animal that can’t tell you exactly what is bothering her. That’s what Dr. Darrow does on a regular basis. Earlier jobs as a vet tech, horse trainer and riding instructor led her to this career as an equine vet. McCoy not only turned out to become her life partner but also a mentor. “She provided me much support and inspiration...it was all very unexpected and romantic.” Darrow offers this to anyone considering a similar career: “Never, ever give up your dream. If I had listened to all the naysayers along my path, I would not be where I am today.” ■