



*Intentional Acts of Kindness: "I don't waste any time. I take out my stethoscope and go to work," says Dr. Kwane Stewart, seen here helping one of the more than 1,200 pets he's cared for over the years.*

Dr. Kwane Stewart offers free veterinary care to pets of people experiencing homelessness, and inspires others to do the same.

By Jen Reeder

# Taking It to the Streets

**K**wane Stewart, DVM, always wanted to be a superhero. He's found an unusual way to do it. Though he doesn't fly through the air or even wear a cape, the veterinarian has embraced an alter ego: The Street Vet.

Armed with his stethoscope and medical bag, Stewart seeks out pets of people experiencing homelessness and offers free veterinary care, with the mantra, "No judgment; just help." He maintained his secret identity in Southern California for years until word of his deeds spread.

As he approaches someone living unhoused with a pet, he'll announce, "My name is Kwane Stewart. I'm a veterinarian, and I walk the area and look for pets in need and deliver free care. If your pet has any needs, I'd be happy to examine them." About 99 percent of the time, the

PHOTOS COURTESY PROJECT STREET VET



*No Judgment, Just Help: Pet owners are sometimes wary at first, but both animals and humans are usually grateful for the attention and lifesaving medical care, such as vaccines against rabies, parvovirus, and other serious infections, and flea and tick preventives.*

people say, “OK.”

“As soon as they say, ‘OK,’ I don’t waste any time. I take out my stethoscope and get to work,” he says. “As I’m working, they see that I’m a real professional. . . . It’s like this door of trust opens immediately. They start sharing anecdotes about their dog or their history. I get the most personal stories from these people, and it’s through their connection with their pet.”

The stories often reflect the strength of the human-animal bond, which is nurtured by 24/7 companionship.

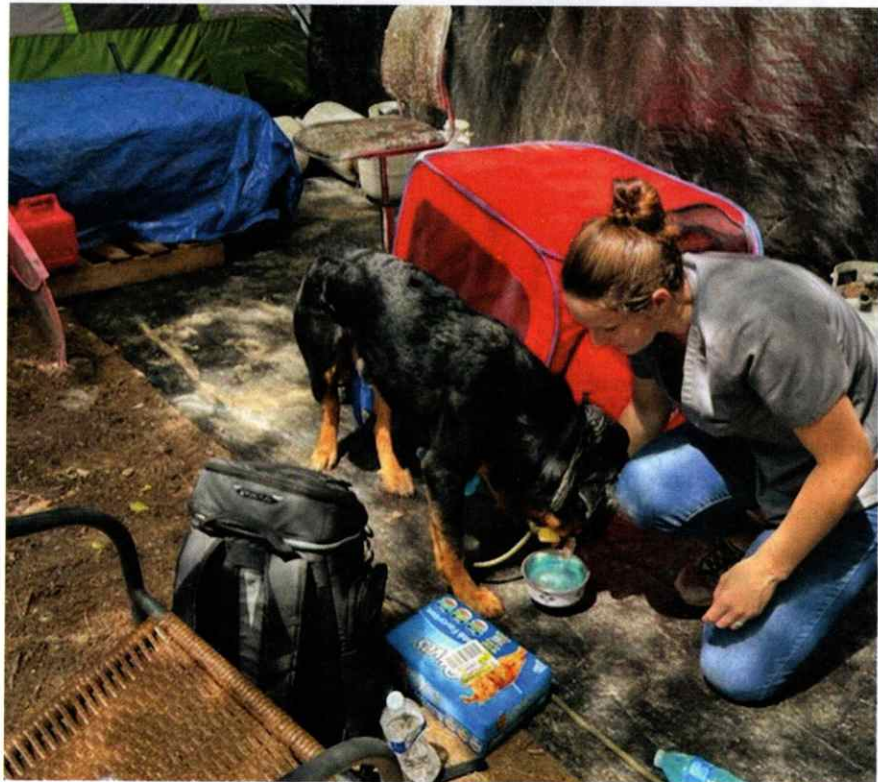
“Some of these pets have rescued people from their dark addictions, kept them away from substance abuse, have helped with their PTSD and their depression,” he says. “They give them hope and motivate them. They are little saviors on four legs for so many people.”

## Reason for Hope

Recently The Street Vet met a woman in Skid Row, a neighborhood in Los Angeles with high rates of poverty and homelessness. She’d been living on a corner with her pit bull for over a year.

“She said, ‘He knows if you’re good or bad, and he helps protect my little area. But the thing he really does for me is he makes me want to get out of here.

He makes me want to get him a yard and me a place, and get out of here. So we’re survivors. He’s helping me survive and giving me hope.”



*Atlanta-based veterinarian Kristen Schmidt spends her free days caring for pets of people experiencing homelessness.*

Last year, Stewart met a military veteran named Richard, who had two dogs: a 15-year-old Pug named Pudding and a pit bull mix named Princess Leia. They were living in San Diego in an old car that sometimes wouldn’t start. Plus, the heat was broken, making winter nights particularly cold.

Richard’s brother offered to let him move into his home, but told him the dogs couldn’t come. Richard couldn’t imagine parting with his pets—who were helping him with PTSD—so he declined the offer.

Stewart connected Richard with the wellness company HolistaPet, which bought the military veteran a new minivan just in time for Christmas.

“There was a big red bow on it, and we just said, ‘This is for you. There’s no strings. I hope this leads to better things,’” he recalls.

It did. A children’s hospital hired Richard for security patrol. Though

Richard and 15-year-old Pudding: Project Street Vet gave this military veteran a boost that led to a new job.



Pudding passed away from old age, Princess Leia spends each shift by Richard's side. They're going to get their own place soon.

"What I've realized is that if anybody needs a companion during a time in their life, it's these people," Stewart says. "If you owned a pet, you know sort of this power they hold to comfort you, to heal you, to be by your side, to get you up in the morning, to force you to exercise or go for that walk you don't want to. Dogs are like Swiss Army knives: There are so many things they can do. And I don't know that we always realize or appreciate that."

## Street Fleet

Stewart's personally cared for over 1,200 pets as The Street Vet in the past 12 years, on top of working full time as a veterinarian. He was declared a GoFundMe Hero in 2020 and went on to create a nonprofit called Project Street Vet to make it easy for people to donate money or pet supplies, volunteer, or create their own branch of Project Street Vet in their own city.

Project Street Vet has volunteer veterinary teams in Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Florida, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. Danae

Davis, executive director of Project Street Vet, says the vision is to inspire veterinary professionals to start programs in their communities.

"We would love to support as many teams as we can," she says.

Volunteers with Project Street Vet typically are mobile, like Stewart—walking on foot in areas frequented by people experiencing homelessness. They will also host clinics in conjunction with another facility, such as a food bank or homeless shelter.

Davis, who often accompanies Stewart during his outreach, says he can typically treat about 75 to 80 percent of patients they meet on the streets, and offers financial-assistance grants to help cover patients who need additional care at an animal hospital.

Vaccinating dogs for rabies, parvovirus, and leptospirosis and distributing free flea, tick, and heartworm preventive medications not only helps the pets and their people, but reduces disease transmission in the entire community, she notes.

Additionally, when people get help for their dogs, they are often more open to receiving help for themselves—such as a shower, cell phone, or copy of their birth certificate to help change their circumstances.

People helped by Project Street Vet are invariably grateful, according to Davis. One woman with a Chihuahua was so excited to meet Davis and Stewart that she led them to different neighbors with pets so that all the dogs she knew could receive care.

"Pets of people experiencing homelessness are more than a companion: They're a lifeline," Davis says. "It's a very special and unique bond they have. It's just incredible to see."

## Building Trust, Saving Lives

Veterinarian Kristen Schmidt, DVM, also marvels at the bond she sees as the team lead for Project Street Vet in Atlanta. Twice a month—on her days off—she spends 12 hours caring for pets of people experiencing homelessness.

She often walks under highway bridges and to other deserted areas with her husband and a veterinary technician, looking for pets to help.

While people can initially be wary because they don't want their pet taken away (and may have had run-ins with authority figures or the public in general), once she explains, "I'm just here to help you," everything changes.

"They'll say, 'This dog is the reason why I live. This dog is what keeps me alive,'" she says. "And I'm like, 'Well, my job is to keep the dog alive.'"

Some grateful people have gotten sober after meeting Schmidt and have gone on to help her with her outreach. She forms close connections with clients, and recently brought her mother to meet a woman with four children and a terrier mix named Love.

Love was already part of the family when the single mom got injured at work and received little workers' compensation. They lost their house and now live in an extended-stay motel since she can't afford a deposit for an apartment.

"The dog is not spayed and has mammary tumors, so I'm working with her to get Love spayed and get her



*A Lifeline: For people on the street, animal companions may be all that keeps them going.*

surgery," she says. "This dog has been with her since she lost everything."

Schmidt bristles when people comment that people who are homeless shouldn't have pets. People she meets will feed their dogs before they feed themselves.

"I think most of us, if we were about to lose our house and the house was to catch on fire, the first thing a lot of people are going to grab is their animal. They're going to run out with their animal," she says. "Well, most of us would be willing to take that risk too

if we were about to become homeless: We'd grab our animal."

Still, compassion is slow to arrive for some members of the public. Recently The Street Vet was kneeling on a California sidewalk and using his stethoscope to examine a dog when a car drove by. Passengers screamed obscenities and threw garbage at them.

The incident only strengthened Stewart's resolve to override his introvert tendencies and talk about Project Street Vet—and why compassion is a superpower.

"When we get up in the morning, we can go and find somebody and intentionally show an act of kindness. It's our humanity that makes us who we are. I tell people, 'Don't be afraid to show your humanity to others, because one act of kindness can change someone's day. An act of kindness will change someone's life at times.'" **FD**

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*Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is the former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.*



*Some pets can be treated on the street, others require surgery or more costly care. In those cases, Project Street Vet also helps to find ways to raise funds.*

For more information about Project Street Vet, visit [projectstreetvet.org](http://projectstreetvet.org). Follow The Street Vet on Instagram at @thestreetvet.