



COMPASSION FATIGUE: A PERSONAL STORY

GUEST: KELLIE SNIDER, MS, BCABA

[00:00:00] **Colleen Pelar:** Hi, welcome back to UNLEASHED (at work & home) where we talk about all of the things that make it easier to do the work that we love and the work that we sometimes don't love so much, helping care for animals. So, in a number of ways that people work with animals, one of the big risks is burning out or hitting compassion fatigue. And my guest today is Kellie Sisson Snyder and I asked her if she would share her personal story about her experiences because she had put a post on Facebook about some of the effects on her. And I said if you would be willing to share this, I think it would be really, really valuable and she very graciously agreed which was lovely. So, thank you so much Kellie. Thanks for coming on Unleashed.

Kellie Snider: Thank you for having me.

Colleen Pelar: So, can you tell us a little bit about your background and working with animals?

Kellie Snider: I sure can. I have always loved animals since childhood, you know. So, [00:01:00] when I was raising my sons, people were just starting to be on face on not on Facebook because it didn't exist but on online discussing animals and all that kind of stuff. I never had a particular interest to be a veterinarian and that was all people really thought of that time if you were going to work with animals, you'll have to be a vet. So that sounded interesting, just not what I wanted to do. So, I just never did anything. When I stayed home to raise my kids for a while and during that time learned a lot about all the different kinds of things that people do with animals and decided not going to go back into the old job I had which was, I worked at NASA. I was a nickel illustrator and a drafts person, and I knew that I was gonna have to go back to school anyway, so I said I'm just going to find Behavior school and go there. [00:02:00] It turned out that I live about 40 minutes from the University of North Texas where ended up getting bachelor's and master's degrees in behavior analysis so that I specifically could work with animals.

My thesis was on dogs with aggression. And so I worked in that field both during grad school and following and traveled quite a bit did a lot of seminars and that sort of thing, but then I got an opportunity to start a behavior program in a local shelter that it's an old shelter non-profit shelter and it had been successful for a long time, but they've never had a behavior department. So, I went in and it was basically figuring out what we need to have a behavior department. And so that's what I did. So, for 10 years I worked there and [00:03:00], it was a really satisfying career, and involved being able to do a lot of research

on my own like trying out things seeing or reading people's research just doing a lot of things and then just being around animals all the time doing training and so forth. So. Shelter that I worked with SPCA of Texas in the beginning of the years that I worked there was switching over from being an animal control facility for an area north of Dallas and they had made the decision as an organization to switch back to best being a nonprofit that they could, you know, not being open admission and so forth.

So, maybe a lot of [00:04:00] ground but it's probably going to be relevant when I talk some more but in an open admission shelter, of course every animal from the community that comes right the door must be taken in once you can provide them another alternative that would work better for the family. So, that means you often have population issues ;you have well, we're in kitten season. So, all the shelters are full of kittens. And if you get random kittens without moms, if you get sick kittens, if you get you know, a lot of humane decisions have to be made related to that. We also the SPCA focused and they still focus heavily on bringing cases with both cats and dogs, occasionally rabbits occasionally, many pigs, all kinds - of any kind of animal you could imagine. So, these animals come in and they're very damaged to begin with and they're you know, they [00:05:00] severe illness they've got severe... Well the way I think of it, their social behavior is appropriate for what they had to live in. They were doing the things they had to do to live in the situation they were in. They weren't damaged in the sense of behaving wrongly; they were damaged in the sense of we humans have expectations of them to be friendly and have gratitude towards us for all of the things we do. So, we go in, we steal them from the only home they ever knew even though it was horrible, and they were sleeping around other dead animals and that sort of thing but sweep back to the concrete kennel. I think we provided, you know, what comforts we could, but they usually didn't know what bedding was for. So, we're seeing all these really rough sides of the animal. The care, right? The care is not the right [00:06:00] word. But of people having animals. And a lot of times people who have whole lot of the times huge number of the times when you've got hoarding or pit bull fighting or rooster fighting, the people who really, really, really do love their animals.

Colleen Pelar: Yes. And that's so shocking to people to hear that. They're like well, how could they do that if they love them, but it's a warped sense of providing.

Kellie Snider: Yeah, like with the hoarded animals, people almost 100% and they all have some sort of mental health concerns of their own, so they may not even recognize that the animal starving to death and that even mean... I remember a guy who... um... his cat, one of his many cats had been dead on the mantle for [00:07:00] weeks. And when he was asked... this is a story that was told me it didn't happen to me. But when he was asked what about the cat on the mantle and he says I just don't know what to do with it. There's just a lot of lack of education as well as mental health issues going on. Then you go with something like dog fighting and cockfighting, with cock fighting, these people who know what they're doing may make these most beautiful wooden inlaid containers for these shiny, perfect spurs that are sharp. I mean you could kill yourself with them if you weren't careful. But that they apply to the animal and they do it with big pride and they've spend hours and a lot of time to make these gorgeous tools to kill other birds with; so much of it and [00:08:00] the

same similar sort of well, it's not usually as good with fighting peoples... they're not as worried about being fancy, but they have a lot of the same concepts of "I love my dogs..." They're proud of what their dogs can do. It's a sport to them. And yet a lot of times their dogs are severely injured and killed and the same with the roosters and often they don't... mmmmm... animals are not um... Animals. You cannot... It's not that no pitbull has ever been made into an awesome pet. I realize that sometimes they are. The people that read those stories online, about... you know, Michael Vick's dogs that were saved and so forth. They don't know the whole story. We know the whole story. We know most of the whole [00:09:00] story. And so, working on the inside where you know this animal may have killed a lot of other animals; he may have killed people, and we had where I worked at Dallas Animal Services, they had several cases... I was only there a short time, but they had three cases that I remember right off the top of my head where animals had maimed humans and we were expected to... I mean seriously like pinned a little boy down and shook him in a public place where he where the dog was up for adoption, and the law won. I mean the dog was let off, sent to a sanctuary... Two other cases where people were injured, animals were saved, and no one tended to the needs of the humans as far as I could tell. In terms of the... in terms of what the city spoke about in terms of [00:10:00] what the uh, community talked about was all save the dog. Save the dog. Save the dog.

Colleen Pelar: How did that affect you and the people you worked with? That messaging...

Kellie Snider: That is kind of where I had levels of compassion fatigue up and down throughout my time there. But by that time was pretty... you just pretty needed a break and way it affected me was like what about that baby? And what about that family and there's not a thing in the world I can do if I speak up saying it's more important to make sure that no other baby is hurt and I'm a bad filter person. So, it puts you in this really bad conundrum where you know what I know that dog. For the dog he is, he is just being a dog. He was doing [00:11:00] what his environment has taught him to do over his lifetime and I get that. I don't think he's bad. What I think he is, is dangerous. So, I think he needs to be euthanized. And so, that really gets up to the... you got people that call you killer to your face or in emails and texts; they call you names based on your decision to do the hard work. So, you're criticized for it. City doesn't support you because half the city wants us to be a no-kill City. The other half is concerned about loose dogs that we have running all over South Dallas that main people and so there's nobody really looking at these real-life people that work in these shelter environments that have to do the work whether you like it or not. And when you have [00:12:00] all got to get together and make a decision about what our priorities are because all this pulling back and forth and doing some... you know this group doing it that way and that group doing it just makes it untenable. As I was going through this, you know, all this push and pull, I'm expected to do this and blah blah blah. Well our shelter, undecided to become no kill; to work toward becoming a no-kill shelter.

They brought in 30,000 animals a year. Some of them had done all sorts of things. Some of them we had no idea what their history was. We started some good things there. People that really wanted to do the right thing. I really think that all was to do the right thing, but I think there is a transition challenge to happen actually both of the last shelters I worked

with. When I was at [00:13:00] the SPCA, the last couple of operations vice presidents that came through were working toward reducing euthanasia reducing, you know, reducing euthanasia...

Colleen Pelar: ...which is an awesome goal...

Kellie Snider: It's an awesome goal...

Colleen Pelar: ...when taken in with the big picture.

Kellie Snider: Sometimes the animals would sit for months and month and months and that was at the shelter without enough people to actually provide them with the working care that they specifically needed which was not have people go in their kennel and sit with them and overwhelm them. They needed people who had skill, but you know, and I had some wonderfully field staff could do that but not for hundreds of animals at the same time. You can't... you can't get to them all. And then with the admission shelter meaning you can't say no to anybody unless you got a specific place will take that case or an alternative for the owner [00:14:00] and that's a... that kind of managed intake is pretty tricky not tricky to set up. But it's cumbersome to set up. So, we had to try to please the public... both sides of the public; try to please the city of Dallas political machine. And then we had to try to do the right thing by the animal and there wasn't anybody looking out for us... for my staff... for the volunteers... Beyond it... the volunteers probably got it better because at least they could step back. I worked 60 hours a week and that's because there was that much work. I could have worked 80 hours a week and not gotten done with everything that needed to be done.

Colleen Pelar: So, what were some of the symptoms that you saw in your staff and you?

Kellie Snider: Among staff, I would see more time spent [00:15:00] alone not wanting to work with other people. Um, maybe you'd find them starting to come in late taking; longer breaks than they were supposed to take. I suspect I can't and I would never.... you know would never name names on this issue anyway, but conversations I would casually overhear, there was a lot of drug abuse going on outside of the office. I know of a couple of cases where it happened on a few cases where it happened at work and they were dealt with, but you would hear people who... when give up bike riding all the time and I haven't... I haven't ridden my bike in 3 months. You know, I don't spend any time with my own dog. And that was one of the things I think when it hit me the hardest was when I didn't even want anyone want to hang out with my own pets and I love them. They're my family. My husband was just like I just wanted to be alone. I just [00:16:00] wanted to be alone and I have always come home and for you know, most of my career, come home and done artwork and things at night. I completely quit, and it was just... wasn't another bit of energy there. I meditate so I used that as a healing tool which was very helpful. But not in the sense that a lot of people think about it, but in the sense of just being able to be with... the poems and kind of just experienced them without running away from them. Because running away creates the all these cycles that I was just listing like drinking too much or

not saying the things you're like a there's so much avoiding. You're not doing the things that you love to do. You're not seeing the people or spending time with your animal you love.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, all the things that fill you back up are the things that you stop doing when you get to that [00:17:00] point, which is such a terrible conundrum. I have a list of some of the symptoms and you... you hit a lot of them just by randomly saying some of the things that affect people but I'm going to read some here to see if any trigger more thoughts in you.

In terms of health problems, lots of chronic ailments; exhaustion, addiction, numbness, guilt, fear, anger, cynicism, hyper-vigilance. Minimizing of problems avoidance of people and other issues in a sense of persecution are sort of the emotional side of it, and with a decreased sense of empathy creativity or the ability to embrace the complexity, where we get sort of that black and white thinking. And so, when you were going through, you know, the people coming in late and taking more breaks and using drugs and not spending time in their hobbies, those are all signs of these things where we get ourselves so strung out that we have no bandwidth to creatively find our way back.

Kellie Snider: Yeah exactly. [00:18:00] Um, and to know to not have a people-centered work environment, by that I mean, you know, we're there for the animals. We work in shelters for the animals, but people are the ones that doing the work and if the people are not holding it together, they can't do their best for the work and problems happen in a typical way that I see people in management handle these issues is not to say, you know, set up trainings or provide support or even you know, "You need to take a day off." You don't see any of that because sometimes a day off is gold. You need to you know, whatever just, having trainings where they can learn about self-care and that sort of thing. Those are not priorities. It's just push harder, push harder. You're not getting enough, and I've seen you come [00:19:00] in late X number of times and "Can we talk about it?" is not the question that asked; it's like you've got to cut it out, you got to get better. I didn't personally get that kind of discussion because I was a manager but um, I certainly know the feeling of waking up in the morning going, just the idea of getting in my car to make that trip was overwhelming

So, I have been at home for... March, I think it was when I stopped working. I'm finally and it's been I've been focusing on art and building and making and things that don't require me to make euthanasia decisions, you know, to help with the euthanasia decisions in large shelters. Letting my [00:20:00] head have a chance to clear out has been amazing and I'm at the point where I am confident if I went back in and I could go back into a sheltering environment and do fine because I think I think I have some different tools now that and I think one of the best things I did, well, is just not work for a while. I'm working selling things. I'm you know, I'm doing an art type stuff because that's my other persona. Um, I'm not under that cloud all the time. I'm not constantly wearing that lead raincoat you can't get around in.

Colleen Pelar: Sort of found yourself again in there, which is good. So, you said you have more tools if you were to go back into a shelter environment. What are some things that you personally [00:21:00] would do differently to make sure that you stayed healthy and happy?

Kellie Snider: Part of that is that I would work toward having systems in place for supporting my staff because a lot of the, you know, when you're in a management position and your staff is having a hard time that's part of your issue too because you see them suffering. Um, so I'm going in the door, I would say that it would have my very most critical, important tools would be we're gonna have um, we're gonna have support for all staff with respect to um, compassion fatigue, bringing people in um, discussing it at meetings, having one-on-ones with staff members... not just staff members, especially staff members that are showing signs. But not just them because a lot of people don't show it, and other people don't have it yet. Everybody in the shelter is at [00:22:00] risk because of where they work. So what can we order preventive measures we can put in place, so I would want that to be part of my job going back in as a manager in a shelter. This is this is just not optional. This is what we do.

The same for myself... when I find myself, you know burning the candle at both ends and I'm you know, leaving the house... I'm getting at work at 6:30 and coming home at anywhere from 6:30 to 8:30 at night. And that's a problem, you know start putting that I have to leave the office at six. I have to leave, you know, I have put some limits on overdoing it. Have people continue... I was pretty good at delegating. In fact, I just took a file... a personality profile for a job I'm considering, and they had me [00:23:00] go through this thing. And that was one of they were like, well, she's good at delegating so. I got that going for me. Um, because I think that's important too when you have that opportunity and your job as you can't do it all yourself; you have people for a reason and it's because the job's too big for one person.

Colleen Pelar: Yeah, and I think that's a big risk with the animal care professionals I've seen where you do start feeling like this has to be done and I have to do it; that we lose this perspective that we're a team and there are others around and I don't have to do everything, but we together someone can do this. So, being able to delegate as awesome.

Kellie Snider: Yeah. Really, it's so important so important no matter whether you're managing one person or someone else. There's always somebody else, you know, do you have a team member you can spare for this project or can we work together assign tasks to our teams so that do me cover all the bases without [00:24:00] burning out a few specific people? That area would be really high priority, but I would pull that into routine trainings as well. I like to have a training in place where you learn the rules of the road of handling in this shelter. In the shelter, you know, we don't yank on the collar and here's how you teach them to walk on the loose leash. So, we start with those kinds of things and when the animals are being treated better and they start to behave better that's easier on the staff too. It's hard. I mean you because we get at shelters, we get a lot of big bully breed maniacs that have never had any manners taught, and so they can be really hard to handle but as

they start getting those skills and the animals start responding because we've got a team of people handling that them that way, then that makes it easier on the staff as well because they're not getting beaten up every time they take this, you know, you know out [00:25:00] or whatever because of him being so excited and leading around, thus giving them skills to know when an animal is actually dangerous or when he's just a maniac that doesn't have any manners, and because there's a lot of confusion.

Yeah, you know, and sheltering a lot of the entry level people that do a lot of the hardest physical labor, cleaning the kennels. moving those dogs around, performing euthanasia. They didn't come from an animal field; usually came from high school or from a temp agency and their job, but they didn't go back to school later in life like I did and decide, "Oh, this is what I really want to do. And this is where I really want to be". So, what happens to them is we just lose them. They quit, and they go away. And so, you may have a good person. If you're not supporting them, in these ways, they'll leave. So...

Colleen Pelar: And that's a huge risk because [00:26:00] first off, we lose great people but we're also sending people out into the world with a... with a scar on their heart that they're carrying forward.

Kellie Snider: Yeah. Yeah like a... a bad attitude about that organization. People are like I can't go there because I heard things are really bad. So, there's not so many levels and firm so many aspects of running an organization having people that because they can't do it anymore or they're burned out or they're suffering from compassion didn't help anybody doesn't help the community because the community loses a strong confidence in that resource. I typically don't... And there are individual cases over the years where people inside the shelter were legitimately doing something wrong. Um, not specifically while I was at any of the organization's I was at but for the most part [00:27:00] asked majority of people work there; they're amazing, they work hard. They have so much love and caring in their hearts and we don't take care of them. We don't take enough care of the people. End of the stick and that's got to be addressed because it's just we can't... we have such a hard where assigned by our communities to do with this care of all these animals; make sure that all the people out there taking care of all these animals correctly in the way that we as a city have decided is the correct way to care for an animal. We don't take care of the people that are assigned to do that job.

Colleen Pelar: And we give people the idea that if it is emotionally draining that it's sort of their fault like if they were tougher or stronger or better than they be able to handle it and that's the worst message to send to because then we have everybody's stuffing all these feelings down instead of saying, "This is incredibly difficult work." And the fact that you're so caring [00:28:00] is an asset, but it also means that it's going to be hard and so we do need to be people-centered and have programs that say, "This is hard; how can we help?"

Kellie Snider: How can we help? We're still gonna love and care for all those animals...

Colleen Pelar: Better!

Kellie Snider: Better! Exactly. It's the airplane oxygen thing is you got to get your own on first before you can put one on the kid next to you and um, I see that lacking in a lot of shelters, especially city shelters because they have so much on their plate. I'm still... there are awesome people who are there to do an important job, but they need the support. They need to know that... you know if I'm having a day where I'm on the edge of tears all day that somebody is gonna not come down on me for that, but they're [00:29:00] going to take care of me for that because you know, I wasn't... I think it was true in both... no, it was in in one of the shelter's I worked with, worked in... I was two doors down from the euthanasia room. That was my office. I was two doors down and so I saw them... dogs that I had recommended euthanasia for... dogs that I had not recommended euthanasia for but other issues like health or you know, now she's bitten somebody and all those kinds of things.

And I watch them... I'd have that on my shoulders watching them go down to that door. Um, we always allowed staff at that shelter to... staff that were aimed... that were qualified to be in the room with the animal as it's being euthanized, and I have really mixed feelings about it because that's really hard. For some people, I think it's a benefit. We used to keep cards; [00:30:00] some of them were shaped like hearts and they could write a note to the animal that they that they knew and put it in there... put it with them when they were taken away, they would be kind of a ceremony performed, and I think it was like that for some people are really valuable. But I think some people need a break... they need any you know, you've euthanized... you've been on the euthanasia task for the last however long period of time maybe you've been doing it for a week or whatever. Um, I'm gonna switch you to something else for now, you don't need to be doing that day after day after day and maybe we'll just take you off that job for a couple of months or however long. Um, those kinds of... those kinds of free options to punishment are not first things that I see thought of in a lot of shelters. So, it's like [00:31:00] if I can let a staff member go home an hour early, well in a sense it costs money... but it doesn't really cost any because how much work and they gonna get done while they're crying? So, I can let them go home to get better, and come back all systems go the next day, that's a pretty, pretty cheap fix. In the same with other things if I can... doing the job that's really hard or aversive to them and they do a really good job at it? Look you did an awesome job. I'm gonna let you do something that you know better and that requires some getting to know your staff and making sure you know what's valuable to them and what would work as a reinforcer. And you've got all these options of reinforcers that are free or nearly free that I think we should really incorporate in how we manage people that deal with animals and people that are suffering. In fact, it should [00:32:00] probably be somebody's job at a shelter. HR doesn't typically do that. They probably should probably be their job just have somebody who's in charge of making sure that everybody's okay and providing them with training tools and with support tools and mentioning, you know... "You've mentioned you were out drinking really

late for the last three days and look, you want to come and talk for a minute? Is everything okay?" Those kinds of things...

Colleen Pelar: It is those kinds of things and they can be dramatic or subtle interventions that make a difference, so it could be something big where we you know, everybody we're going to have an all-hands meeting; we're gonna do a training. Or it could just be, I'm really worried; I've heard you say that three times lately and that doesn't feel like the you I know. Is everything okay? And sometimes the changes are so subtle that the person isn't seeing the change, but their friends and family are noticing and to go, you're just not you.

Kellie Snider: That's an [00:33:00] interesting point because after I left my last job, several friends mentioned to me that they've seen things... And my sister even, my sister mentioned it and some other friends; a few of them are psychologists and so they're like they mentioned they had seen changes in me. And um, I was not really zoned in on because I was really just trying to get through the day every day. And so, there's a place for your friends at work casually to kind of maybe speak up in a way that a manager couldn't, but sometimes it's up to a manager, supervisor, or an HR person or somebody say, you know what I just want to make sure you're okay. You want to go out for a coffee or something? And so... so yeah that really rings true to me because I... after they started mentioning it, my husband, my [00:34:00] friends and... It's like yeah, I just not been all there lately. I just have been zoned out and...

Colleen Pelar: It's a tough. It's a tough thing. I'm so glad you're doing better now. I mean that...

Kellie Snider: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I'm I um, I'm feeling great. I'm really happy to have been able to spend this time just doing art like art therapy. And we're you know, we're doing a little work on our home that is nice to have. Coming along and some things that are for... like I said, I'm still selling. I'm still making money. I'm still doing some consulting but I'm not going... I'm not switching from shelters to going back to working with aggressive dogs. In fact, I'm done working with aggressive dogs one on one; that will not be my job in the future because that is another area...

Colleen Pelar: Absolutely!

Kellie Snider: That one is... Last dog I worked with was maybe a year and half ago [00:35:00] and he got me. He got me... he was my second bite working with aggressive dogs. This is the second time I've been bitten in years. It was just like when I'm with family I was in my professional mode and I'm like now we can continue doing this if you want to and here's what blah blah, and I got in the car and started driving and I was driving... I had to go to the ER; the bite was that bad and I was driving along going, okay, just replaying this event that happened in my mind and I'm like; I missed it. I didn't see it coming and I missed something. I think I've kind of maybe figured out what happened going since then, but that day and for the next many days, I didn't know why that dog bit

me. I didn't know why and I'm like if I can't read it, [00:36:00] it's not safe for me to be there.

Colleen Pelar: Right and that goes back to some of those, you know, the symptoms of being either burned out or dealing with compassion fatigue or that we are... our senses are a little bit dead, and in our ability to take in all the information and it's just draining. It's just... it's very difficult.

Kellie Snider: Yeah, you know it really is and I don't know that that's what happened; it very well could be, I think. This dog had some training and um, but he was not under very good stimulus control. So, that is kind of where I've gone after thinking about it, and fortunately, they didn't call me to come back and work with them because I probably would have declined but, the other sad thing is that they said their next step would be to put him on a shock collar which I found horrifying because he's already so... He's very... he was brought up... long story, but he was just not in the place [00:37:00] or any...

Colleen Pelar: ...and that is not a tool that's going to make it better.

Kellie Snider: Yeah, so how I guess really the thing for me is I had these experiences and being in a position where I can provide support for people that have those kinds of things going on in their lives, that gets me excited because I'm like we can use our own experiences and get training and all that stuff all that, you know, just learn, learn, learn; share with each other and set up ways for people to open up or if... you know, some people aren't going to pour their hearts out to you, but if you have resources, if they have ways to deal with it, could make this hard work that has to be done, because that's what our country is decided is how we're going to manage animals. Other countries do it in a lot of different ways. So, we do this... we do the sheltering system. We do rescue, we do [00:38:00] training, and we do all these things in this way that our culture accepts to some extent. So, we need to have in place that that part of the program that cares for the professional; cares for the person.

Colleen Pelar: A hundred percent. Actually, that's why I've started switching what I'm doing because like you, I'm really motivated to do that kind of work and to learn more about that this point because it's so needed. It's absolutely vitally needed and I'm really grateful to you for sharing your experiences with us because it can be hard to talk about and a lot of people don't want to talk about it. But the more we hear someone else sharing how it affected them, the more it normalizes it and says, oh this is... this is something that happens and it's not that I'm not doing a good job. It's that we're not talking about the effects. So, I'm really grateful to you for that. So, if listeners wanted to learn more about you and the [00:39:00] things you do, how could they find you?

Kellie Snider: You can look at my websites. I have one that's www.behaviorunlimited.com, my art website is www.paintedcatstudio.com. And you can email me at Kellie@behaviorunlimited.com or Kellie@paintedcatstudio.com. And that's K-E-L-L-I-E.

Colleen Pelar: And I will put that link for those into the show notes, so that people don't have to write these things down as they're driving, and Kellie is an amazing artist, so I'm going to beg her to let me put an image or two of her work into the show notes here. We'll see if she says, yes, so, thank you so much for joining me today, Kellie. I really appreciate you talking to me.

Kellie Snider: It's been [00:40:00] wonderful. Thanks.

Note: This file was generated using transcription software. It may not be 100% accurate.