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MAGAZINE

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK
FALL 2022

HEALING HOUNDS

DR. RENÉE ALSARRAF SHARES
LESSONS LEARNED AS AN
ANIMAL ONCOLOGIST

PLUS: HAUNTED
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In Sickness and in Health

Animal oncologist Dr. Renée Alsarraf tells us what dogs can teach their people

WRITTEN BY CINDY SCHWEICH HANDLER

Many doctors have written about the life lessons they learned from their patients. Add Dr. Renée Alsarraf to that list.

When Alsarraf was diagnosed with endometrial cancer in 2018, she reflected on former cancer patients who'd shown her how to live with grace during their illnesses. Four years later and in remission, she has authored a book on the subject, with chapters devoted to the wisdom each patient imparts — chapters with names like “Bentley,” “Cosmo,” and “Franny and Lucky.”

In *Sit, Stay, Heal: What Dogs Can Teach Us About Living Well* (out Oct. 18 from HarperCollins), Alsarraf, a veterinary oncologist and medical director of PetCure Oncology in Clifton, weaves her own story through accounts of her work with beloved pets. We talked to Alsarraf about how she got into this specialized area of animal care, what it's like interacting with owners during vulnerable moments, and what dogs know that humans need to understand. >



DELIGHTED BY DOGS Dr. Renée Alsarraf, an animal oncologist, has owned boxers for 40 years.



COURTESY OF RENÉE ALSARRAF

WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE FIELD OF VETERINARY ONCOLOGY?

My father was a human medical oncologist, so I guess it was in my blood. I grew up in Michigan and went to Michigan State as an undergraduate and for my veterinary training. As a rising junior in veterinary school, I did an externship in New York at the Animal Medical Center in oncology, and fell in love with it. It was the late '80s, and I didn't know these specialties existed. I did my internship and residency there. While at AMC, I met my husband, who is originally from Kansas City and is a veterinary ophthalmologist. We lived in Kansas City for three years, where I was the first veterinary oncologist in the state, and did radiation there as well.

IS IT HARD TO SEE PEOPLE AT THEIR SADDEST MOMENTS, WHEN THEIR BELOVED PETS ARE CRITICALLY ILL?

A lot of people think the job is traumatizing, that patients must die and everyone must be sad. And it can be emotionally draining, but it fills me right back up being able to give a family another Christmas or summer with their dog or cat, or even a few more years with a pet. I don't sit across from families; I sit next to them and go through everything. The more knowledge someone has, the better. Knowledge is power! If I can teach them all about a disease — what we can do to fight it, what the prognosis can be — they can make the best decisions for their pet and the family. I want to minimize their regret and scars from all of this. We can do surgery or radiation therapy; your neighbor's dog or cat may have had that, and you see them in the backyard and you don't even know. Quality of life is the goal.

So often there really isn't a wrong decision. There are just differences between those decisions — whether or not to even treat the cancer, to go for the full gusto of the most aggressive protocol, something in the



CUDDLING WITH COOPER Dr. Alsarraf relaxes with Cooper, a goldendoodle.

middle, or just palliative care. I want the family to feel heard and loved and understood, and to know they did right by their pet.

WHEN DID YOU LEARN THAT YOU HAD CANCER YOURSELF?

I was 51. I had actually made a routine gynecology appointment for two months short of a year, and an ultrasound revealed a nodule in the uterus. I had surgery at Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York soon after, and the surgeon found a 3-millimeter nodule

outside the uterus, too, so it was spreading. I needed radiation and chemotherapy. Thank God I went when I did, because there were no clinical signs. I'm the poster child for why everyone should get checked every year. It's scary to face your own mortality.

WHAT CAN DOGS TEACH HUMANS ABOUT FACING ADVERSITY?

I can't tell you how many lessons I learned that are in my book. One big lesson for me is that dogs are never

COURTESY OF BETSY GROSSMAN

“WE THINK WE’RE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEM, BUT DOGS THINK THEY’RE RESPONSIBLE FOR US.”

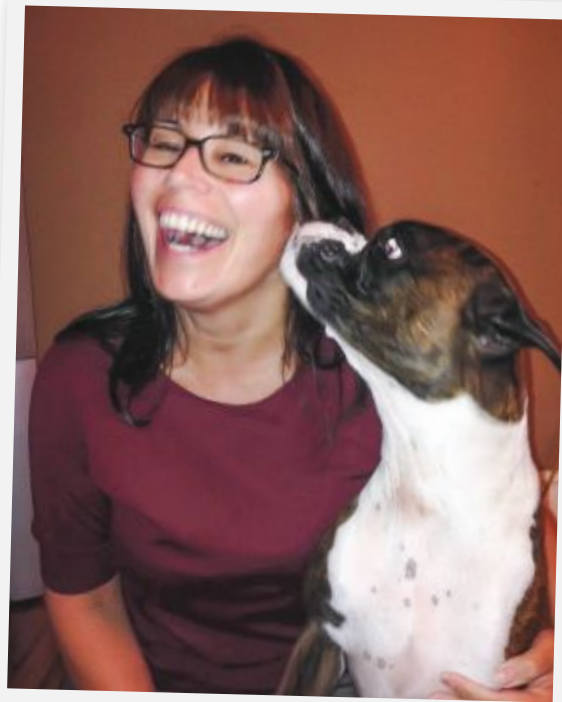
DR. RENÉE ALSARRAF

judgmental. We all judge ourselves, and the tapes in our heads are sometimes saying things that aren’t very kind. Dogs never judge themselves like that, and we shouldn’t either. They’re happy every morning the sun comes up. They cherish every moment in the present, don’t fret about the past and certainly don’t fret about the future. So many patients come in wagging their tail. When I was being treated, my tail would be between my legs, and I had these thoughts cluttering my head: “Will I get sick? Will my hair fall out?” We can lose the beauty of the moment.

Another important lesson is that we’re all better together. Dogs are pack animals; when they descended from wolves, they survived that way. Dogs have evolved to be within our pack. We, as mankind, are better when we’re all together. My life is better for living with a dog; they love me even when I don’t shower that day. We as mankind are better when we’re all together and working in conjunction.

I do also believe that dogs are put into our lives at certain times to teach us certain lessons. As sad as it is that their lifespan isn’t longer, we at least have that benefit of being able to have a few or many dogs in our lifetime fulfilling different needs.

WHAT CAN READERS EXPECT FROM YOUR BOOK? Even though the underlying premise of the C-word



is there, it’s an uplifting book. So many people come in and say “Oh, my wife says I’m crazy to treat my dog’s cancer!” But this is a living, breathing creature who loves us unconditionally. Every chapter in the book is about a different patient and either what the family learned from that dog or what I learned. We think we’re responsible for them, but dogs think they’re responsible for us. For example, Chapter 2 in the book is about a beagle who enters with his crabby owner. He always took his cue from his pet parent. When his pet parent wasn’t having a good day, the dog lay by his side. On a good day, the dog wanted to be out walking with him.

Sometimes a person would come in who didn’t even want their cat; their deceased spouse insisted on it. But now all the widower has left is the cat and he wants to do everything he can for it. Other times, a client has cancer and doesn’t want to give up on the dog with cancer because it feels like giving up on themselves as well. I’m hoping readers are validated, and know more about the human-animal bond.

YOUR OWN DOG, NEWTON, WAS DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER AFTER YOU WERE. WAS HE ILL FOR LONG?

I’ve had boxers for the last 40 years, and they do get a lot of cancer. While I was going through my own battle, Newton was diagnosed with lymphoma. He was 6 ½ years old. Initially, he did very well, but he did

not do as well as the average dog. He was never an average dog to begin with. That was hard, because I was doing well. Newton became my nursemaid and lay on the sofa with me when I wasn’t feeling well, but always showed up for my family, too. We treated him aggressively, and he didn’t get sick from it. He lived seven months. I was 100% good with the choices I made for him. ■

Alsarraff will be appearing at Watchung Booksellers in Montclair in partnership with the Montclair Township Animal Shelter at 7 p.m. on October 19. She will also be interviewed by Michael Strahan on Good Morning America at 8 a.m. on October 20.