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WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER: A Q&A WITH DR. RENÉE ALSARRAF

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By **Kelsie Donaldson** on October 10, 2022

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Dr. Renée Alsarra (DVM '91) treated cancer in canine patients for more than two decades. Then, at age 51, she was diagnosed with cancer herself. Upon receiving her cancer diagnosis, Alsarra found that the empathy she had for her patients went both ways; Alsarra's furry friends seemed to uniquely understand her difficult journey, and they showed her the power of positivity and unconditional love. Alsarra put these reflections and more into her book *Sit, Stay, Heal: What Dogs Can Teach Us About Living Well*.

WHAT INITIALLY DREW YOU TO VETERINARY MEDICINE?

I've wanted to be a veterinarian since I was seven years old. I never wavered. My father was a human physician, and in fact, my entire family is made up of doctors and nurses. It was a calling more than anything else.

CAN YOU GIVE A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF YOUR CAREER AFTER YOU GRADUATED?

After graduation, I did a rotating internship in medicine and surgery at the Animal Medical Center in New York City. I fell in love with oncology, I matched at the Animal Medical Center for my residency, and then after my residency, I stayed on a little bit longer to study radiation therapy.

I moved to Kansas City in 1994 and went into referral specialty practice. I was the only [veterinary] oncologist in the whole state. While there, I was also able to get radiation therapy off the ground. We actually started it in a human hospital. In the mornings, before the human patients came in for their radiation treatments, we would drive the dogs and cats over that needed radiation and treat them before the start of our workday.

After three years in Kansas, I ended up in New Jersey. I worked with a big group at the Animal Emergency and Referral Associates, but I owned my own practice within the group. I hired another medical oncologist and five oncology nurses, and later we were able to open a second referral specialty hospital for oncology.

Concurrently, in my free time (ha ha), I worked with six other veterinarians to create the very first stand-alone CT, MRI, and radiation therapy center for animals, which we sold in 2015. That same year, I sold my medical oncology business, though I stayed on seeing patients. And then when COVID hit, I wrote a book!

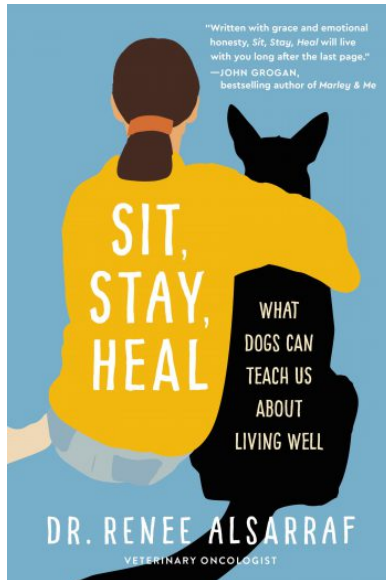
WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO WRITE A BOOK?

I had always wanted to write a book. As a veterinarian, I meet so many people who say, "I've always wanted to be a veterinarian!" and I felt the same way about authors. In the summer of 2018, I was diagnosed with cancer, and underwent surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. At the time, I didn't do any social media, yet I found it took too much out of me to have conversations over and over with friends who were trying to find out how I was doing. So, I emailed a group of my friends, and every couple of weeks, I would tell them how I was faring. One of those friends was a very prominent literary agent in New York City, and she said, "Why don't you write a book?"

I blew it off at the time. When my treatment came to an end, my husband and I went on a trip to Rhode Island. I was reading the hotel newspaper horoscopes, and my horoscope said, "You should begin writing your book today." Two days later, I began writing the book.



"Dogs take every day for what it is; they don't worry like we do. And I think because of that, they live a much happier life than we do sometimes," says Alsarra.



WHAT DO YOU HOPE READERS TAKE FROM YOUR BOOK?

I hope that this book will touch many lives. Dogs are a great source of comfort and guidance to people struggling. This book shows us the enormous power that the human-animal bond plays in our world. Each chapter is about a different patient, each with his or her own life lessons to impart. I wanted to share what these families and I learned from dogs. The book is a front row seat to what life is like as a veterinarian, and it's a front row seat to the struggles that many of us face and how we survive and come out stronger in the end.

YOUR BOOK DISCUSSES HOW YOUR DOG PATIENTS TAUGHT YOU ABOUT "RADICAL EMPATHY." CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT THIS PHRASE MEANS TO YOU?

A lot of that is demonstrated in the book by how our dogs are our unconditional companions. There I was as a veterinarian, always taking care of them, but then when I needed to be taken care of, they understood without ever using words. My own dog developed cancer while I was undergoing therapy. That's something you never want to go through with your four-legged companion, but we did, and my dog was right there by my side. Without words,

they understand our feelings and emotions. They fill a need just when we need it the most.

WHAT IS SOMETHING YOU LEARNED FROM VET SCHOOL THAT YOU STILL USE TODAY?

That medical oncology is always a new and evolving science- which I think is exciting. Another is realizing how much I love interactions with pet parents.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR CURRENT VETERINARY STUDENTS?

Soak it all in and eat it all up! Even the things that you don't think you're going to use—you might realize that you do, in fact, need to use them. Book knowledge is the cornerstone of being a good veterinarian but gaining experience and learning from people who have been in your shoes really makes the difference. Don't fear asking too many questions.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE WAY TO CELEBRATE BEING A SPARTAN?

Seeing our football team win and yelling at the TV like a crazy person!

THE FOUNDING MEMBER

During her time at MSU, Alsarraf created Michigan State's Pet Loss Support Group. She worked to get the group up and running with the help of donations and was soon able to hire a licensed therapist who specialized in bereavement. The group, which still meets on the second and forth Thursday of every month, is free for anyone to join. "That was pretty special," Alsarraf reflects. "I connected with a lot of pet parents who were grieving and didn't really have a place to turn. It was another way I realized how important the human-animal bond can be."

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