

# Companionien

ASAV MEMBERS' MAGAZINE | Q3 2022

FEATURED MEMBER:

*Marlena Lopez*

*"I think that social media is a really powerful tool that can help vets and organisations within the animal community connect with local pet owner populations, but it's also a great way to – hopefully – encourage, inspire, and help the next generation as well."*

What happened at the ASAV Annual Conference?

Little miracles – Q&A with Kirsty Nalvarte on RSPCA Queensland's transformative cat rehab program

Helping wombats through mite-y tough times

Plus

Our accredited hospitals  
New immunotherapy to help dogs fighting lung cancer  
Could catnip have a hidden benefit?  
No fake mews!





From the President **4**

From the Editor **6**

News in Brief **8**

ASAV Happenings **10**

Featured member – Marlana Lopez **12**

A day in the life of Marlana Lopez **17**

Cat rehab! Q&A with Kirsty Nalvarte **18**

2022 ASAV Annual Conference wrap-up **23**

Pushing through the challenges to help wombats **28**

Accredited hospitals –  
Eltham Central Veterinary Hospital **30**

Happy ending – Buddy the brave community cat **34**

# contents

## THE ASAV EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

### President

David Lee

### Northern Representative

Bruce Mackay

### Eastern Representative

David Lee

### Southern Representative

Bruce Parry

### Western Representative

Leon Warne

### General committee members

Karen Jackson

Stephen Yeomans

Julia Crawford

Louisa Poutsma

Alistair Webb (ASAV Nominee to the AVA Board)

### Recent Graduate Representative

Marlena Lopez

### Publisher

The Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

Suite 40, 6 Herbert Street

St Leonards NSW 2065

Telephone: +61 2 9431 5000

[www.ava.com.au/asav](http://www.ava.com.au/asav)

### Editor

Heather Vaile

[wordycause@hotmail.com](mailto:wordycause@hotmail.com)

### ASAV Office

Executive Officer – Elaine Robertson

[elaine.robertson@ava.com.au](mailto:elaine.robertson@ava.com.au)

Advertising - Linda North

[linda.north@ava.com.au](mailto:linda.north@ava.com.au)

### Design & Production

Southern Design

[www.southerndesign.com.au](http://www.southerndesign.com.au)

### Printing & Distribution

Ligare Pty Ltd

[www.ligare.com.au](http://www.ligare.com.au)

### Editorial Material

Editorial contributions from members and other interested readers are welcome, and should be emailed to the Executive Officer. The Publisher does not hold itself responsible for editorial or advertising material in *Companion*. Unless stated, material in *Companion* does not reflect the endorsement or opinion of the AVA or ASAV. Advertisers are responsible for complying with the Trade Practices Act and amendments.



AUSTRALIAN  
SMALL ANIMAL  
VETERINARIANS

ASAV is a special interest group of The  
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd  
(AVA)



# FEATURED MEMBER



**MARLENA LOPEZ**

Our featured member for this issue is Marlena Lopez, a vet who works for RSPCA Victoria at a large animal shelter in Melbourne.

She tells Heather Vaile about her early life growing up in a small town in the US, why she enjoys connecting with pet owners, animal lovers and aspiring vet students on social media, and how she hopes to use her new role on ASAV's Executive Committee to help bring about changes in the veterinary profession.

**Marlena Lopez is a recent graduate vet with a megawatt smile, a great passion for animal welfare, and a genuine desire to help bring about change in the veterinary industry.**

She began her life in the pretty small town of Big Bear Lake in the heart of Southern California. The town is located about 2000m above sea level and is popular for mountain biking, horse riding and fishing in summer, and snowboarding and skiing in winter.

"It was good small-town living and I think growing up surrounded by so much nature really ignited my love and respect for animals and the environment," Marlena says.

She and her sister were raised by their single mother who didn't have the opportunity to advance her own education. She was focused on the education of her daughters and intent on providing them with the opportunities she didn't have growing up. When Marlena and her sister showed interest in the sciences, she really encouraged it.

"My mum always recounts that as soon as I could talk, I would go round and tell everyone that I wanted to be an animal doctor when I grew up," Marlena says. "At such a young age, I don't think I really had any concept of what vets actually do, but I just knew that I loved animals, animal doctors helped animals, so that's what I was determined to do."

"As soon as I expressed interest in becoming a vet, my mother gave me some supervised

responsibilities of the daily maintenance and care of our companion animals.

"We had a variety of animals growing up including dogs, a cat, rabbit, fish, and horses. Having pets enhanced my childhood, and nurtured values of kindness, compassion, and personal responsibility.

"And I did have a special dog growing up. There's nothing that really exceeds all the memories that you have of a childhood pet. I had a yellow Lab named Jimmy. He showed me how to care for animals and really stemmed my passion for animal welfare."

Marlena also recalls one of her teachers from high school with great admiration and fondness and says he influenced her perspective on what she wanted from her own future career.

"I had a really dedicated physics teacher in high school, Mr Bradley, who's actually retiring this year. He just had such a devotion to his job, with a lot of enthusiasm. He would say: 'Physics is life! Life is physics!' The passion he had really inspired me to pursue a job that I would be equally passionate about. He was really incredible."

After completing secondary school, Marlena, like many young people of her age, was ready to become more independent. She packed up her car and headed off to San Francisco for university.

She enrolled in a zoology degree at San Francisco State University, however, halfway through her studies, Marlena got itchy feet.

She decided to travel overseas. Marlena loved the idea of exploring another culture

so she moved to Madrid to study Spanish language and literature at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid for a year.

She then returned to the US to continue studying zoology, but transferred to California State Polytechnic University, Pomona (Cal Poly) where she enjoyed the learning experience immensely.

"I LOVED my experiences at Cal Poly, it was an incredible university with professors and staff who were very dedicated to helping and inspiring students," Marlena says.

In particular, she was inspired to delve more into science and ecology subjects because she wanted to learn more about the building blocks of all living things.

"The complex linked systems of organelles, proteins, and membranes that make the composition of each cell and the way these cells interact to form body systems, it really sparked my interest in biology further," Marlena says.

Around the same time, she also applied and was accepted into the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program which aims to increase participation in graduate degrees by students who are typically underrepresented in tertiary education institutions because of financial limitations or other socio-economic barriers to advancement. With the support of this program, she completed a research project in reptilian ecology in addition to her coursework.

After attaining a Bachelor of Science in Zoology in 2014, Marlena completed a





research internship in Costa Rica studying the social ecology of bats.

“The McNair program provided me with a lot of opportunities, and I did consider pursuing a career in research,” she says.

“I grew up my entire life thinking I wanted to become a vet and was suddenly conflicted about this choice. I applied to Masters, PhD, and DVM programs, but as soon as I was accepted into the DVM program, there was no question that that was the one I was going to go for.”

In her mid-twenties, Marlena made the huge decision to move 16,000 kms from home and enrol in the DVM course in Melbourne. It was such an exciting time in her life, she decided to create an Instagram page to show family and friends back home what she was learning in vet school and to share her experiences of being an international student living in Australia.

To her surprise and delight, her page **@veterinary\_adventures** also started to gain the attention of animal lovers and aspiring vet students from all over the globe. Marlena enjoyed these interactions and found it rewarding to know that she was educating others on social media with similar interests to her own.

She mentions that when she was a pre-vet student, she didn't really know who to turn to for advice on applying to vet school and says: “I wished I had been able to connect to veterinary students and learn from their experiences.

“Completing vet school applications can be a really daunting process and I always wished that I had somebody that I could turn to and ask for advice.”

The popularity of her Instagram posts has continued to grow and today, Marlena has over 70,000 followers!

“I've been able to talk to a lot of students from around the world which is really inspiring for me,” she says happily. “I think that social media is a really powerful tool that can help vets and organisations within the animal community connect with local pet owner populations, but it's also a great way to – hopefully – encourage, inspire, and help the next generation as well.”

Marlena adds that going through vet school and managing a high caseload as a recent graduate vet is not easy and she wants to share her experiences online, so that people get a genuine insight into what it's really like, rather than a curated version of a veterinary career that skips over the hard parts.

“I encountered many struggles in university, so I hope that by being honest about the adversity I've faced, it helps show other people that they're not alone,” she says.

“Because that's definitely how I felt at the time. We're told to be strong and suck it up for so long, it makes you feel that it's such a privilege to even get to vet school, that you're not allowed to suffer once you're there. But there are a lot of people suffering in vet med and I think it's important for us to be honest about it.”

“By showing what life is like as a vet and really what goes on behind the scenes, I can hopefully bridge the gap between clients and vets and improve the standard of care pets are receiving, as well as improve job satisfaction and the mental health of veterinary professionals.”

As she continues to reflect on her veterinary journey so far, Marlena recounts that one of

the best parts of her DVM course was the friendships she formed with her fellow vet students along the way.

“Vet school for me was a bunch of highs and lows and there were a lot of times when I felt really overwhelmed and stressed, she says candidly. “We had a really heavy course load and I relied on my classmates a lot and I still confide in them today.”

One of the more challenging shared experiences for Marlena and her classmates was trying to finish their final year of the course during the first dreadful year of the pandemic.

However, despite the many shocks, interruptions and cancellations of extra-mural placements that occurred during that year, Marlena proudly graduated with her DVM at the end of 2020.

“My biggest supporter through all of it was my fiancé David,” Marlena says.

“He provided me with much needed emotional, esteem, and tangible support to make it through my studies and during the start of my career.”

## NEXT STOP, RSPCA VICTORIA

Marlena landed her first job almost immediately after graduating and in January 2021, she started work at RSPCA Victoria's animal shelter in Burwood East.

“I've always had a passion for animal welfare and an interest in working in shelter medicine, she says.

“There was a job advertised at the RSPCA, not looking for a recent grad at the time, but I took the opportunity and applied anyway. And I'm really grateful to be working there.

“I've had the opportunity to garner my consultation and medicine skills, as well as see a large variety of cases and attain really valuable surgery and training experience. General practice vets mainly focus on the health of individual animals, whereas shelter vets provide individual and population care to local animals. As a recent graduate at the RSPCA, I have had the best of both worlds – because I'm gaining experience as a general practitioner serving the local community, but also learning a lot about shelter medicine by providing veterinary care to homeless animals.”

Marlena also points out that most of the animals that enter the RSPCA shelter come with little to no medical history, arrive from different locations and life experiences, have a variety of exposure histories, and may very well have missed out on the preventative medicine generally considered to be routine by most small animal practitioners and responsible pet owners.

“This means the shelter population is at a higher risk of infection, diseases, and





behavioural problems,” she explains. “Working there has definitely made me a stronger clinician, and the exposure to such a variety of cases has helped me to hone where my interests are. For example, I have a clinical interest in soft tissue surgery, and I’ve gotten a lot of experience in that over the last year.”

When asked what it is that appeals to her about this area of veterinary medicine, she replies that she enjoys the sense of transformation at the end of an operation, “providing an instant gratification.”

By way of example, she mentions a very recent case she’s worked on.

“Yesterday, I was working with one of our amazing surgeons, Dr John Parncutt. A cat

**“There is a team of senior vets at RSPCA who know how to turn each query into a very teachable moment, and I’ve learned a lot from their expertise.”**

in foster care presented, not really himself, flat, and not eating. I was quite concerned. X-rays revealed that he had a diaphragmatic hernia, so he was rushed to surgery and I assisted in resolving the issue.

“I checked in on him today and he’s doing really well.

“Surgery is often something where you can just see, feel, and fix the problem. There is generally a quick and incredibly rewarding answer in surgery a lot of the time.”

Marlena also enjoys working at the RSPCA because she feels very well supported by her senior colleagues at the organisation. Her special interest in surgery stemmed from

the mentoring she has received from senior surgeons Dr John Parncutt and Dr Preethi Karunaratne.

“As a vet, I have had incredible mentors,” she says. “There is a team of senior vets at RSPCA who know how to turn each query into a very teachable moment, and I’ve learned a lot from their expertise.”

As for the most difficult part of her job, Marlena’s answer is one that vets of all stripes will relate to: “The hardest part would probably be managing client communication and expectations, and trying to maintain that healthy work/life balance.

“I think the pandemic has really exacerbated a lot of the difficulties with client communication. And I think that finding a healthy work/life balance is something that I’m still really learning to navigate. It’s something that requires regular maintenance and evaluation.”

## LENDING A HAND TO PETS IN THE PARK

In addition to her very busy job at the RSPCA, Marlena has also been actively volunteering with the non-profit organisation Pets in the Park (PITP) for several years. The charity aims to improve the well-being of people who are suffering from homelessness and who need some veterinary assistance to care for their pets.

Marlena began to volunteer with PITP as a veterinary nurse while she was still a university student, but enjoyed the experience so much, she continued to volunteer after settling into her new job.

“Coming from a socio-economically disadvantaged household, I personally understand the challenge of providing quality healthcare to your pets, so I use my education and experience to help families

and their companion animals achieve optimal health and happiness,” she explains.

“And it’s really quite rewarding work. I find it rewarding to go more often because then you get to really form relationships with the clients at the clinic. I really get to see how they and their animals are going over time. You’re volunteering your time and services, but it definitely doesn’t feel like work!”

## CONNECTING WITH THE AVA AND ASAV

Marlena first joined the AVA as a veterinary student and later the ASAV as well.

In 2018 she won a student scholarship to attend an ASAV conference in Melbourne and she’s been hooked on the fabulous learning and networking opportunities they offer ever since!

“It was really great – all pressure-free learning and there wasn’t any quiz afterwards!” she says. “You can attend all the lectures strictly for the learning part of it and network as well. And I think it really helped me, now looking for jobs as a new grad or just for connecting with other people in the field.

“The AVA has provided me with a lot of opportunities and I’m really grateful that they support students by having those scholarships.

“Being raised in such a small town with limited resources and opportunities, I had to go out and create my own opportunities. So, I think that probably helped give me – I guess boldness is the right term. I’m not afraid to ask questions or try to go out and create my own opportunities for learning.

“When you’re raised in a small town, you have to learn to be bold!”

Recently, Marlena was elected to the role of Recent Graduate Representative on the ASAV’s Executive Committee.

When asked why she wanted to take on this new extra responsibility, she replies that she knows many of her peers from her DVM course have been struggling since entering the veterinary workforce and she wants to see meaningful change in the profession.

“I think that the veterinary industry is currently facing a lot of challenges and it’s hard to highlight that without sounding too negative or too critical – that’s a hard balance,” she says.

“But I do think that a lot of clinics and organisations sometimes overlook the challenges and just focus on trying to promote mental wellness by just concentrating on the positives of the career.

“It’s a really rewarding career and there are a lot of positives to it, but I think it is also equally important for people to know that they’re not alone in their struggles. And also – to call for change.”



Marlena goes on to say that a lot of the conversations at the AVA conference this year were about what needs to change in the profession and that she hopes to use her position on the ASAV Executive Committee to serve as an advocate for her colleagues and to foster a greater sense of collegiality in the small animal vet community.

As for what kind of changes she'd like to see, Marlena replies that an overhaul in terms of veterinary salaries, support for new grads, and a review of some management procedures would be high on her list.

She mentions that some of her former vet school classmates have talked candidly to her about their struggles since starting work and expressed their disappointment that the career isn't what they had pictured.

So how does she think recent graduates could be better supported in the industry?

"Well, it is multifactorial, she says. "So, there are probably a lot of things that clinics can do to support new graduates – and that new graduates can do to help themselves.

"Right now, it is quite a tough time for new graduates to enter the profession. I think that vet clinics need more staff and are struggling to hire more experienced staff. But at the time I was graduating, I know some clinics were hiring new grads with the promise to offer them mentorship and guidance without providing the resources to fulfill this commitment."

Marlena contrasts this with her own experience working as part of a large veterinary team and she knows she is very fortunate to have a pool of experienced vets she can turn to for support. However, she understands that this isn't an option available to everyone.

"But something that my workplace implemented that I think all clinics could apply is an organised training schedule for new grads," she says.

"And when new grads are doing interviews, they could look and enquire to see if clinics offer this. My classmates have reported that their biggest struggle as a new grad is not having enough support.

"Many of my former classmates have left at least one job within their first year of clinical practice. A lot of them are really struggling to find good mentorship and support."

"New grads also need to feel safe, and clinics should have a protocol in place on how to deal with abusive clients."

"We enter the profession because we're passionate about animal welfare, but we're seeing so many people leave it prematurely due to the pressures of the job."

Marlena applauds the RSPCA for how well it supports its new veterinary staff and mentions how much she has benefitted from



the organisation's commitment to nurturing of new team members.

"I had one-on-one scheduled meetings with a designated RSPCA mentor at two weeks, one month, then every three months – and I still have them to check in and set goals together. I started with a week of doing vaccination consults, before gradually introducing other consults into my list. And during my first three weeks, there was always a senior vet rostered on administration work, so I could turn to them for support.

"I think it's really important for new graduates to have – and to seek out – an organised training program or practical and surgery skills. And for all these expectations to be communicated to and with the scheduling staff.

"I understand that it's quite difficult to have extra hands available for training when there's a vet shortage, but I think it's really pertinent that clinics looking to hiring new grads are prepared to help them thrive and not just merely survive their first year in clinical practice."

Marlena obviously thinks deeply about the complex issues facing the veterinary industry, and perhaps unsurprisingly, in addition to her work with the ASAV she's also a member of the AVA's Veterinary Business Group (VBG).

However, she was taken completely by surprise in her final year of university, when the VBG awarded her the distinction of being the Veterinary Business Thought Leader of the Year (2020) for her social media work in educating pet owners and pre-vet students about the profession.

Marlena says at the time she thought that she was just applying for another scholarship so she could attend a VBG annual summit but was thrilled when she received a far bigger honour than she was expecting!

## LOOKING AHEAD

Marlena's resourcefulness and passion for helping animals, her empathy for others, and her gift for communicating through social media talents to improve outcomes for pets, their people, and the veterinary professionals they meet suggest she has a very bright future ahead of her.

So, does she have a dream job that she sees herself doing one day?

"I'm still in the infancy of my career and I have a lot of varied interests that I'm trying to explore right now," she replies. "And the great thing about general practitioners is that each day is so varied.

"I do have a passion for wildlife and conservation, but I also enjoy the work in small animal practice. I think pet owner education is important and something that I'm interested in – so I'm not sure where that leaves me."

"My career goals are to continue volunteering and learning about wildlife and conservation medicine, but also work within a small animal clinic and somehow incorporate social media and other forms of media into that work.

"I think it's important to grow. You don't really learn what you like until you try out different things, so I want to remain open to opportunities." 🐾

# A day in the life of ... Malena Lopez



**7 AM** My foster cat Lily is a good snooze alarm as she is eagerly waiting for me to wake up and will start purring in my ear as soon as my alarm goes off. I turn on my coffee machine first thing in the morning to let the machine warm up while I get dressed. I feed Lily and take my coffee to go. I often use my 45-minute commute to work as a time to call family and friends from back home, given the time difference, it's the evening on the west coast of the United States.

**8 AM** My shift starts at 8.30 am. I am looking after the shelter animals today and I start by visiting the barn. I give a pentosan polysulphate injection to a goat with degenerative joint disease, create a treatment plan for a guinea pig with pododermatitis, and review faecal analysis results of sheep. I then spend some time writing notes and call clients seen the day before in consult to relay test results and formulate treatment plans.

**10 AM** After taking a coffee break, I visit the adoptions area to see what animals need a vet assessment. There's a cat

showing signs of respiratory illness – cat flu is something I am often tasked with treating in a shelter environment. I visit each area of adoptions, including the cat condos, dog pens, and rabbit and guinea pig runs and perform whatever tasks are needed. I finish the morning by performing a health check on a dog, each animal in our care receives a full health check every 28 days.

**12 NOON** I return to the clinic to write my clinical notes before having lunch.

**1 PM** There are a lot of dogs under our care, so the next couple of hours are spent looking after the dogs in the kennels. I complete a variety of tasks including health checks and vaccinations of recently arrived dogs, post-operative wound and dental extraction site checks, creating treatment plans for skin disease or weight management, completing ear cytology or mass FNA, and collecting blood and urine for analysis. There is a separate shelter shift that focuses on providing veterinary care to the cats in the shelter.

**4 PM** The last area of the shelter I visit is the wildlife and exotics ward. There are a

variety of species to care for in this sector, including native wildlife, rabbits, guinea pigs, mice, and birds. I have an interest in wildlife and conservation medicine, so playing a small role in helping native animals become rehabilitated back into the environment is a really fulfilling part of my job.

**7 PM** I get home, have a shower, and then my partner and I make dinner together. I brush Lily's teeth and she eats dinner at the same time as us. We watch a crime drama in the evening to wind down at the end of the day, with my Lily on my lap for comfort.

**9 PM** I usually do some computer work before bed such as writing content for social media or responding to emails. Right now, I am working on a set of educational materials for new dog and cat owners to provide them with advice for taking care of their new companion. This is set to be published next year and will include a mix of advice for dealing with common problems and questions they may have and provides some inspiration for anyone struggling with their new pet. 🐾

