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DOCTORS IN THE DOG HOUSE

By *Inside Jersey Staff*



Jerry McCrea

Faith Krausman makes a house call for one of her larger patients.

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BY JULIE JACOBS

Faith Krausman is making her first house call of the day. The patient is 4 -year -old Gabriel who has a heart condition and requires regular monitoring and

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special medication. He weighs in at 150 pounds, which might seem like a lot for a youngster, but it's just about right if you're a Great Dane.

Dressed in teal scrubs, Krausman pulls up to the Montclair house and opens the hatch of her SUV, where she stores an assortment of color-coded bags packed, according to medical need, with syringes, injectables and cold compresses.

Before long she's inside Bill Oswald's home greeting Gabriel, who, like his sister Ramaela, comes up to Krausman's chest when he stands on all fours. Krausman begins by spending a few moments cooing up with both dogs and then proceeds with her examination of Gabriel, a gentle giant of an animal.

"Our dogs don't like getting in the car at all and with their size it's a big issue," says Oswald. "We've had to go to a veterinary office and they've had great anxiety over it. House calls are extremely convenient for us and it's a much better environment for our pets. They're in their element, so it's less scary."

Krausman spends 40 minutes with Gabriel and then heads to her next visit in another part of town — a wellness check on Andy, a 4-year-old Cairn Terrier, and cats Princess and Charlie, 10 and 4. She weighs them, inspects their eyes, ears, nose and teeth, and administers vaccinations in the comfort of the kitchen as owner, Susan DiMarco, looks on. "I used to have five animals, so it's been very helpful to have Faith come to our house," she says.

Krausman is one of approximately 124 mobile veterinarians providing in-home treatment for animals in the Garden State, according to the New Jersey Veterinary Medical Association.

Krausman, who received her veterinary degree from Cornell University, has been treating pets in their homes since the early '90s. Her first visit was with a dog suffering from an ear infection, and since then she's treated dogs, cats and smaller animals, such as guinea pigs and ferrets, in homes, assisted living facilities and even a Petco store. She also has expanded her service area north to Nyack, N.Y., south to Edison and west to the Morristown, Basking Ridge and Gillette areas.

"I had a good feel for doing this and have always liked it," she says. "It's more personal and I get to know the animal in its own environment. It's helpful to animals that are fearful or too old to travel and to people who aren't able to take their pets out to the vet."

Mobile veterinarians typically offer the same services as office-based vets: physical exams, vaccinations, heart worm tests, stool analyses, blood work, postoperative care and treatment for various conditions and illnesses. Some even provide microchip placement (which tracks pets when they are lost) and a bit of behavioral counseling. When X-rays, complex tests or surgery are needed, they suggest the animal be taken to a clinic or hospital.

Fees for house calls are higher than office visits. Pet owners are paying extra for the convenience and to cover the doctor's driving time and travel costs. Rates range from \$85 to \$110 for one pet, with discounts frequently offered for other pets seen during the same visit.

"I think owners feel the same stress as their pets about going to the vet, so they put it off and then it becomes really stressful, especially if they're bringing multiple pets," says Lori Duggan, a mobile vet from Moorestown, in South Jersey.

"There are plenty of animals that throw up, defecate and urinate in the car from the stress, so there's a huge benefit to treating them where they're most comfortable. And for the owners, if we're running late, at least they're at home and can do other things."

Duggan came to veterinary medicine as a second career after working in finance. Following her 2004 graduation from the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine in Philadelphia, she spent more than five years as an associate at the Animal & Bird Health Care Center & Hospital in Cherry Hill, honing her skills not only with dogs and cats, but also reptiles, birds, small mammals and other exotic pets. She started her house-call practice in September 2010 and has quickly grown her patient base strictly through referrals. Her service area extends north to Princeton and south to Cape May.

"During my years in Cherry Hill, I'd occasionally stop by someone's house on my way home just to make it easier on them and found that I really enjoyed it," she says. "The animals were calmer and I developed closer relationships with the owners. I knew I wanted to go the house-call route."

These days she leaves her own menagerie at home (she owns a traveling petting zoo with donkeys, goats, rabbits, ducks, chickens, a pot-bellied pig and more) to provide care to a variety of four-legged and two-legged creatures — even skunks. "We've seen some really interesting things," she says.

In addition to the usual schedule of services, Duggan trims wings and beaks, consults on husbandry and, through an agreement with the Atlantic County ASPCA, once a week performs spading/neutering and other operations in the organization's mobile surgery van.

She also will euthanize an animal at home for pets that are too sick to transport and for owners who are too distraught to make the trip to an office.

"That's one of the services people really appreciate," says Krausman, who also provides euthanasia in the home. "Some owners want it simple, others have music or light candles and involve the whole family. It is extremely emotional, but it's a very nice way to let a pet go."

After vets have spent months, even years, visiting pets in their homes, the doctors begin to feel like they're a member of the family.

“People feel like we’re their friends and have even ordered extra takeout when they knew we were coming,” says Duggan.

“I think the pets see us that way, as well. If referrals are any indication, everyone seems pretty happy.”

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