

January 2024 | trends.aaha.org



Trends

magazine

We Are All Connected

Natives in VetMed Seeks to Grow a Community, **24**

Telehealth After COVID

Why Some Techs Believe It's More Relevant Than Ever, **34**

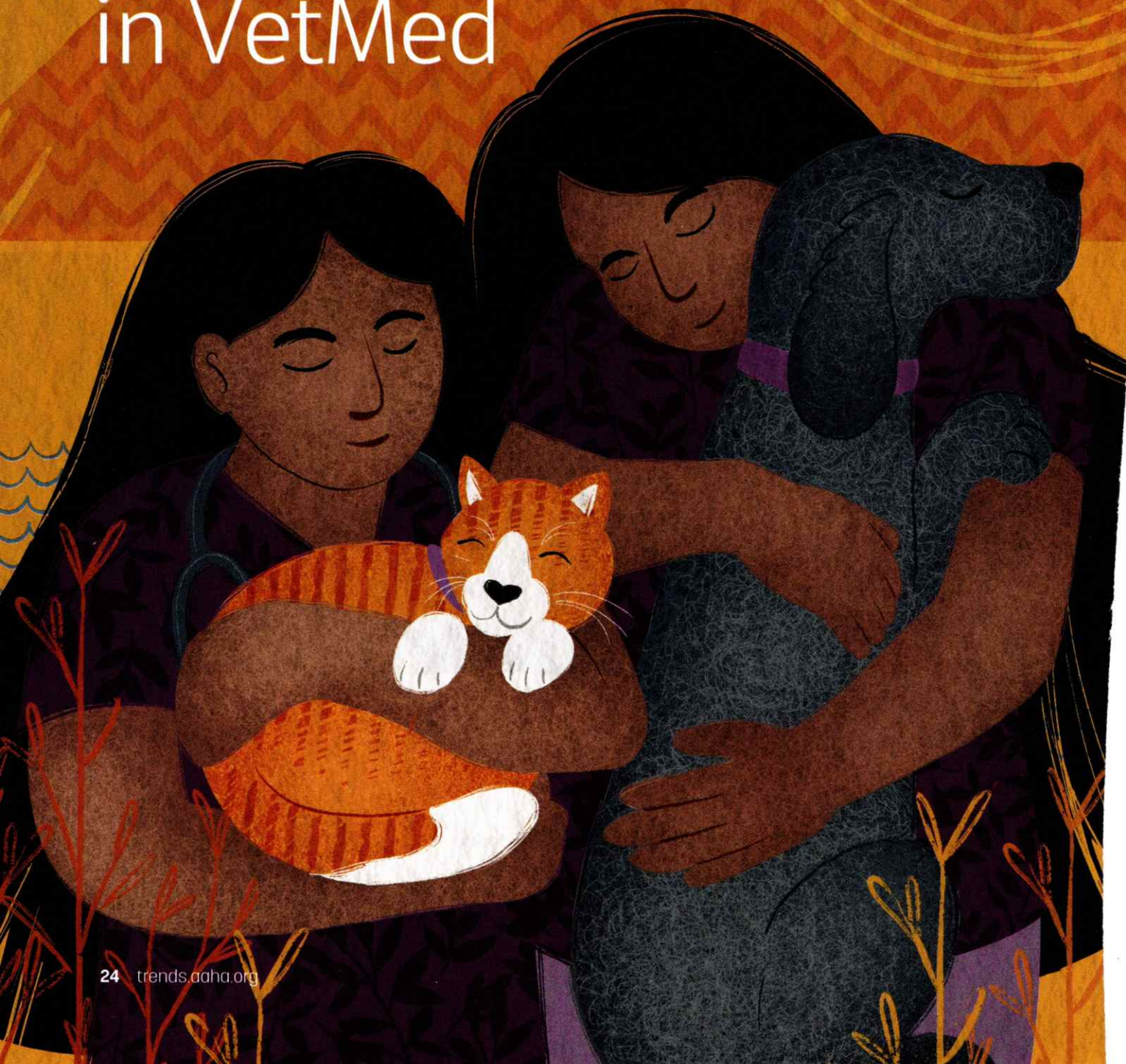
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE | STAFF RETENTION | ANESTHESIA VTS



An Extra Wind:

Natives

in VetMed





Group Offers Camaraderie and Support for Indigenous Veterinary Students and Professionals

BY JEN REEDER

Summer Lara's passion for veterinary medicine intertwines with her love for her culture. The second-year veterinary student at Colorado State University is an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of the Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota, with family across the different Dakota and Lakota Nations.

"One of our teachings has to do with *mitakuye owas'in*, and that has to do with 'all of my relations.' That idea is really important to us because we view everybody as a relative, whether it's people or animals or plants—any kind of living thing," she said. "That's the basis of my culture."

Growing up, she saw people in her community wondering how to afford care for their pets while also not having an animal hospital nearby. So she helped out at local spay/neuter clinics on the reservation and realized she might have discovered a career path with particular meaning, since reciprocity—or *ituha'an*—is integral to her culture as well.

"Traditionally, our wealth was not measured by how much we held but rather how much we gave away, and that plays into that idea of reciprocity because it has to do with how we support each other," she said. "So for me, veterinary medicine is my giveaway—my form of reciprocity."

But as she started on the path, she often felt alone. While pursuing her undergraduate degree at the University of Minnesota and working at a veterinary clinic in Minneapolis, she mentioned to an attending veterinarian, “I’m Native.”

His response took her aback: “So do you have a dad?”

“I’ve had my fair share of experiences like that, whether they’re microaggressions or outright racist things,” she said. “But it’s always still kind of a shock when it comes in a professional place.”

Fortunately, she also found supportive mentors while volunteering for Student Initiative for Reservation Veterinary Services (SIRVS), a student group founded by the late Larissa Minicucci, DVM, that offers free veterinary services to tribal nations in Minnesota and neighboring states.

One active SIRVS mentor, Marilou Chanrasmi, was impressed with Lara’s spirit, but she was also concerned that Lara felt alone. In fact, she knew three other Native students in a similar situation. So in the spring of 2022, Chanrasmi sent an email suggesting the four students join her for a Zoom meeting to connect.

“It was beautiful seeing how they lit up,” she recalled. “I just planted the seed: what if a group formed that brought other Native vet students and vet techs together? They loved the idea and ran with it.”

Natives in VetMed was born. The group welcomes Indigenous people working in various capacities in veterinary medicine across the globe. The four founders—Summer Lara, Lecia Mata, Kayla Plucinski, and Mitakamizi Liberty—are pursuing nonprofit status, building a website, and hosting monthly Zoom meetings with members.

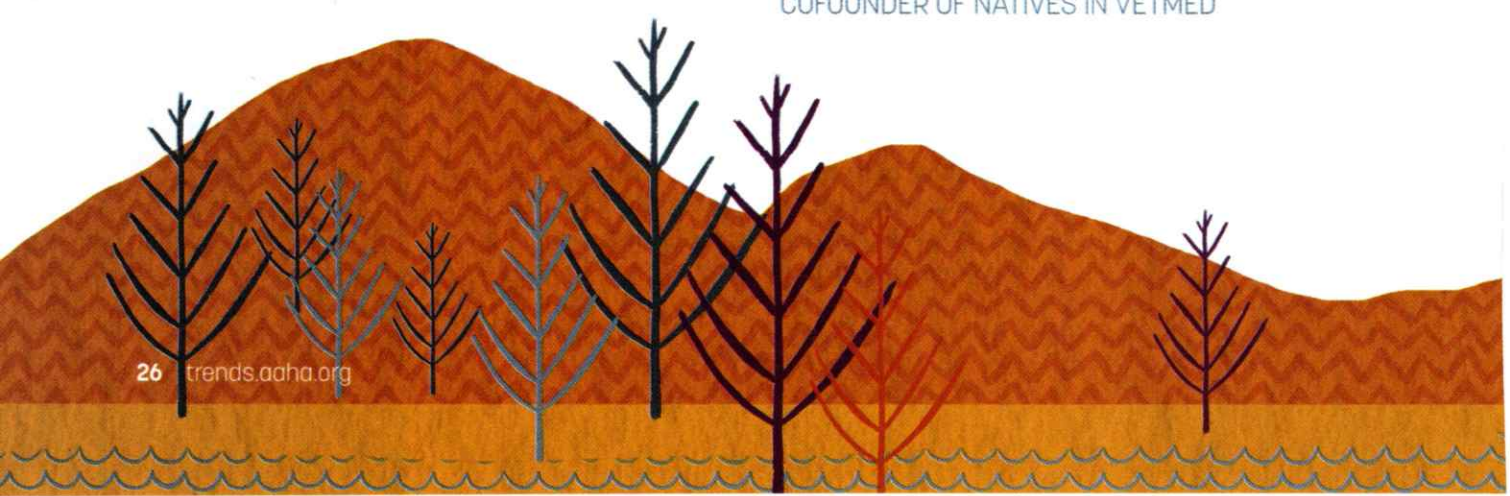
With guidance from the nonprofit Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity (CARE), which develops and supports BIPOC nonprofits across the country to diversify animal welfare (Chanrasmi is executive director of CARE Centers for the organization), Natives in VetMed is rapidly expanding. Already, members represent 33 tribes from the United States and Canada.

“What excites me most is all



“Traditionally, our wealth was not measured by how much we held but rather how much we gave away, and that plays into that idea of reciprocity because it has to do with how we support each other.”

SUMMER LARA, VETERINARY STUDENT AND COFOUNDER OF NATIVES IN VETMED





← Summer Lara vaccinates a dog at the Red Lake Nation clinic in June 2023.

the dreams and ideas that each of them have individually, and then they bring it together collectively,” Chanrasmi said. “They are so humble, but they do so many amazing things.”

Community Support

Natives in VetMed offers support to its members and to their communities. This summer, the group cohosted free veterinary clinics on Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota and Lake Traverse Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

The chance to connect with one another while giving back to Indigenous communities resonates with Lecia Mata, an enrolled member of the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe in Minnesota studying to be a veterinarian at Colorado State University. She attended both clinics, which involved pop-up clinics in places like Minnesota’s Ponemah Elementary School as well as knocking on doors and offering services to family pets.

“At one point in Red Lake, the number of Indigenous volunteers

outnumbered the non-native volunteers, which I don’t think I’ve ever seen happen in any setting,” she said. “It was just so cool.”

Mata feels buoyed by the connections. When she began her undergraduate studies at University of Minnesota, she was a first-generation college student who had just taken full custody of her younger sister. Carrying a full credit load to pursue a double major in animal science and Ojibwe language felt overwhelming, and she kept being told it wasn’t feasible to do both.

“I grew up helping with sweat lodge when I was little with my grandma. She speaks fluent Lakota, and she wouldn’t speak it to the kids—she would only speak it to other elders. And I remember wondering, ‘Why?’” Mata recalled. “Then you learn the history of boarding schools and how, in their lifetime, it was illegal to practice their cultural traditions and their ceremonies. So being able to learn my language just felt like a responsibility to myself and my family to be able to take that back.”

When she met Lara, she “almost wanted to cry” because it was so empowering to meet a Native student studying to be a veterinarian while double majoring in Dakota language.

Photo courtesy of Marifou Chanrasmi





← Left to right: Leicia Mata, Tanisha McChesney, and Raye Taylor.

How to Be an Ally

Veterinary professionals who want to be more inclusive of people of diverse backgrounds can start by intentionally choosing to work on self-awareness, according to Raye Taylor, DVM, an advisor to Natives in VetMed.

“You have to choose to listen, and you have to choose to recognize that you have biases. It doesn’t make you a bad person, but you have to recognize what is implicit,” she said. “Then you have to choose to learn.”

Learning can involve bringing in groups that offer cultural sensitivity training. For instance, CARE is launching a program called Vet REDI to

bolster racial equity, diversity, and inclusion in the veterinary industry, and the organization blendvet offers online CE courses and certification in DEI.

Taylor said financial support of groups like Natives in VetMed is always welcome, as well as creating job opportunities for underrepresented communities. She suggests reaching out to local schools to ask for applicants from the community or offering a shadow day for high school students to share the profession.

“Listen with intent and speak with positivity,” she advised. “Speak with collaboration and partnership.”

“Seeing that it is feasible, it’s just not common, I felt like I found people who finally got it,” she said.

Volunteering with SIRVS and Natives in VetMed also reminded Mata of why she wanted to go into veterinary medicine.

“I was constantly getting met with people from the community recognizing that I was Native and just sharing how proud they were of me and of the other Native veterinary technicians and students who were on these trips,” she said. “They never expected to see Natives being represented in such a niche profession.”

More than 91% of veterinarians identify as White, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. That lack of racial representation could have dire consequences for a profession facing staffing shortages. So Natives in VetMed mentor and advisor Raye Taylor, DVM, senior veterinary medical officer for Rural Companion Animal Care for CARE, and part-time professor in the College of Veterinary Medicine at University of Minnesota, hopes the veterinary industry will work to diversify the profession.

“When you are growing up, if you are not seeing someone who looks like you in a particular profession, without intentionality, it doesn’t become an option,” she said.

Photo courtesy of Raye Taylor

She personally thought all veterinarians were evil after a veterinarian callously and coldly euthanized her childhood dog, Thor—a notion that extended to any medical professional wearing a white coat. Thankfully, her father recognized her potential and love of animals, and arranged for her to shadow a veterinarian when she was in high school.

“That very first day, this kind veterinarian—a White man—did change my vision,” she said. “My guiding light is empowerment through knowledge.”

Mentors have been life-changing for Natives in VetMed cofounder Kayla Plucinski, CVT at Ashland Area Veterinary Clinic in Ashland, Wisconsin, and enrolled member of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa. She’d been encouraged to become a veterinarian, but soon after beginning undergraduate studies, she realized the financial challenges would be insurmountable.

Then she met Monte Fronk from the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe in

“When you are growing up, if you are not seeing someone who looks like you in a particular profession, without intentionality, it doesn’t become an option.”

RAYE TAYLOR, DVM, NATIVES IN VETMED
MENTOR AND ADVISOR

Minnesota, who introduced her to SIRVS spay/neuter/wellness clinics, where she decided to switch gears and become a veterinary technician.

“I just fell in love with being a nurse for animals,” she said. “It’s a very rewarding field.”

She hopes that when students of different backgrounds intern at veterinary practices, the team will try to really get to know them and why they chose the field. And, if possible, she suggests they offer scholarships.

“Just encourage them to stick with it,” she urged. “It’s worth it.”

Inspiring Each Other

Awanookwe Kingbird-Bratvold, founder of the nonprofit Awesiinyag Are Loved, and professor of Indigenous Sustainability Studies at Bemidji State University in Minnesota, is a community partner with Natives in VetMed and worked alongside them at the Ponemah clinic. She’s inspired by the group.

“It’s very beautiful and something that is extremely exciting to see within Indian Country today,” she said. “To say that I’m proud is an understatement.”

← A child cradles her puppy at the Red Lake Nation clinic.



Photo courtesy of Raye Taylor





← Summer Lara on left and Dr Raye Taylor examine dog at Red Lake clinic June 2023.

She's seen the way members uplift one another while collaborating with her nonprofit, SIRVS, CARE, the spay/neuter nonprofit MN SNAP, the rescue group Secondhand Hounds, and other partners to care for the pets in Indigenous communities.

"We're all different organizations, but we're all coming together, and we're building a family out of this," she said.

Many representatives from these organizations reunited in October 2023 at The Gathering, an annual conference hosted by CARE. Natives in VetMed cofounder Mitakamizi Liberty, a veterinary assistant at MN SNAP, said his group was doing "together dreaming" for the future, which might include youth programs, sponsoring externships for vet students, being references for applicants to veterinary school, and building a support network for Native students and graduates.

He first met his "auntie" and mentor Chanrasmi when SIRVS volunteered on his reservation,

and he started helping out because he loves animals so much. She arranged a tour of the University of Minnesota's veterinary school and he hoped to become a veterinarian, but the financial hurdles were too great.

After graduation, she helped him set up job interviews, and he's incredibly grateful for her help, which landed him at MN SNAP. But he doesn't want financial challenges to deter other Indigenous students.

"I don't have any particular regrets about my life, but it's definitely something that was a barrier, and I don't want that to be the case for anybody in the future," he said. "I would like Natives in VetMed to be a supportive network for any *'shinaabs* looking to get in the field."

It's an optimism shared by Natives in VetMed member Tanisha McChesney, a certified veterinary assistant at AAHA-accredited DC Ranch Animal Hospital in Scottsdale, Arizona, volunteer with the spay/neuter nonprofit Soul Dog Rescue, and enrolled member of the Navajo Nation.

McChesney—whose Diné name T'aa'háábaa' means "seized from battle" because her pregnant mother deployed during Desert Storm as a Marine but was called home due to her pregnancy—was welcomed "with open arms" when Natives in VetMed flew her to Minnesota for their first clinic. She felt a special camaraderie.

"We were all the same little kids running around on the sacred lands, holding little rez puppies, but now we get to do something for them, for us, for everybody," she said. "It's full circle."

McChesney's tribal work has given her "an extra wind," and she's studying to become a veterinary technician. She's thrilled to be part of Natives in VetMed.

"I'm so inspired by this group of people," she said. "I would love to see where Natives in VetMed goes from here, because the sky is the limit." ■

Learn More

Indigenous veterinary students and professionals interested in joining Natives in VetMed can email nativesinvetmed@gmail.com. For more information, visit: nativesinvetmed.org.

To donate to Natives in VetMed, visit: every.org/natives-in-vetmed

Photo courtesy of Tasha McChesney