Tony La Russa's ARF thanks Bay Area veterans with free veterinary care

Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation offers free vetinary care for veterans' pets.

By JOAN MORRIS | jmorris@bayareanewsgroup.com
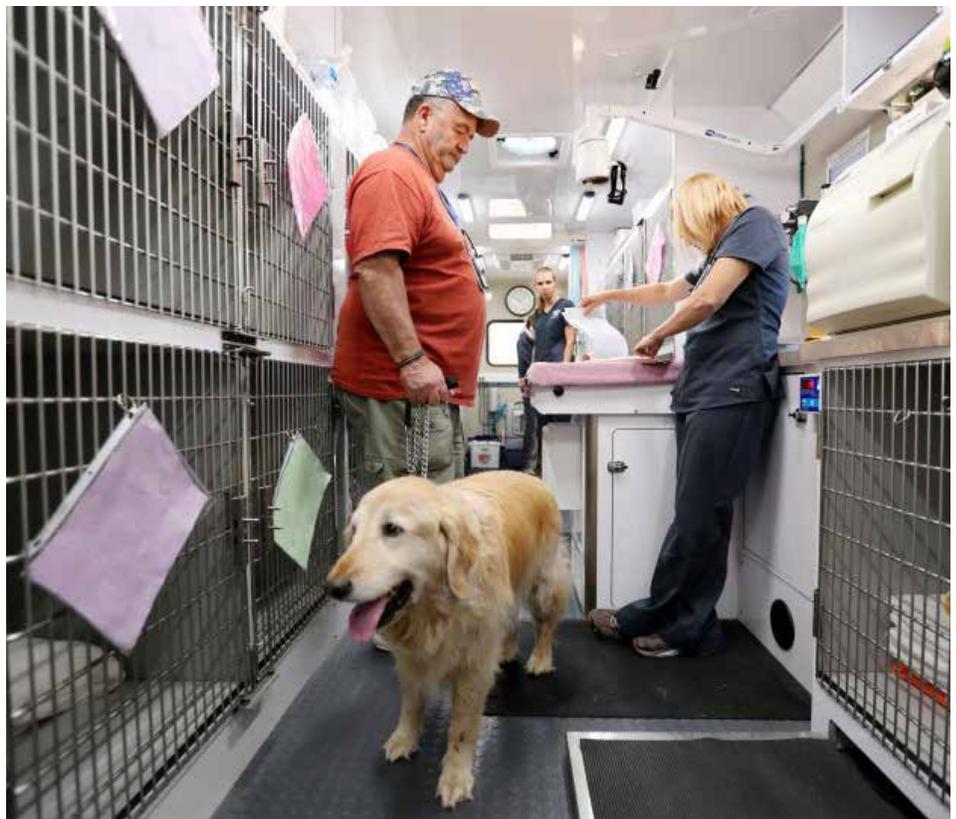PUBLISHED: November 11, 2018 at 8:00 am

On a sunny fall Friday, an eclectic line of animals is forming outside the Veterans Administration health center in Livermore — several golden retrievers and Chihuahua mixes, a pit bull, two cats.

Their owners, all military veterans, chat as they wait patiently, occasionally leaning down to soothe a canine or feline anxiety. They're here for just one thing: the big white van with colorful stripes parked at the curb.

Staffed by Dr. Josie Noah and her assistants, this mobile veterinary clinic from Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) in Walnut Creek visits the Livermore and Martinez VA centers on alternating Fridays, providing free exams, vaccinations and flea medication to the pets of vets.

"We love working with the veterans," Noah says. "The veterans have done so much for us. Being able to give back to them is very rewarding."

The idea of thanking veterans for their service in such a practical way — free pet health care, paid for by the nonprofit foundation — was what inspired La Russa, the former Oakland A's manager and Baseball Hall of Famer, to launch

Veteran Don Perry, left, holds his dog Rowdy as Dr. Josie Noah, right, checks Rowdy's status during the ARF's Pets and Vets programan in an ARF mobile clinic at the Veterans Medical Center in Livermore, Calif., on Friday, Sept. 7, 2018. The ARF program offers free treatment to veterans' pets. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

ARF's Pets and Vets program in the first place, says executive director Elena Bickers. The cost of even routine pet checkups can be prohibitive for a vet on a fixed income. So La Russa began sending the mobile clinic to VA clinics to offer help.

With four pets — two golden

retrievers and two cats — Navy veteran Don Perry is something of a regular, stopping by for routine care and follow-ups for at least one animal at a time. Today, Perry and his wife are accompanied by 10-year-old Rowdy, a golden they can't keep out of the pool. Rowdy is recovering from an ear infection that needs to be checked, and

Perry hopes to get the dog a blood test for heart worm and have his nails trimmed.

"These are good, dedicated people," Perry says. "I've had animals for years and years and years, and these people are top notch."

Perry credits them with saving his other's dog's life. During a routine exam five months ago, Noah discovered the dog had a tumor in one testicle, which was removed when the dog was neutered. Now Perry tells all the vets he meets about the service.

Of course, the well-equipped mobile clinic pops up at pet food stores and other locations for spay and neuter surgeries, too. There's a small surgical room in the back and there's not much that they can't handle, Noah says, but the veterans center visits are among her favorites.

Seeing Noah and her team work in this confined space is like watching a carefully choreographed dance. They bend to examine rashes, kneel to clean ears — Noah jokes that most of her scrubs end up with patches on the knees — and diagnose a wide array of ailments.

This is Dublin resident Richard Nicomedez's first visit to the clinic, and the Navy veteran has brought Rex, a dog of uncertain heritage, with him. Nicomedez's family adopted Rex five months ago. The nervous dog snaps at Noah when she kneels down to examine him. For everyone's safety, Noah explains, she'll have to put a muzzle on him.

Rex is not happy about the ordeal and howls his displeasure as Noah carefully wraps him in a towel and lifts him onto to the exam table. She notices a small wound on the inside of his leg that appears to be infected, and he has a red mark on his eye, the result of an inverted third eyelid, a common issue for dogs.

"There's no need to worry about it," Noah tells a concerned Nicodemez. "Just keep an eye on it."

Rex gets his rabies vaccination, a prescription for his infected wound, a 6-month supply of flea and tick medication and the all-clear on his heart-worm test.

"This is so great," Nicomedez says, before leading a much happier Rex out of the clinic.
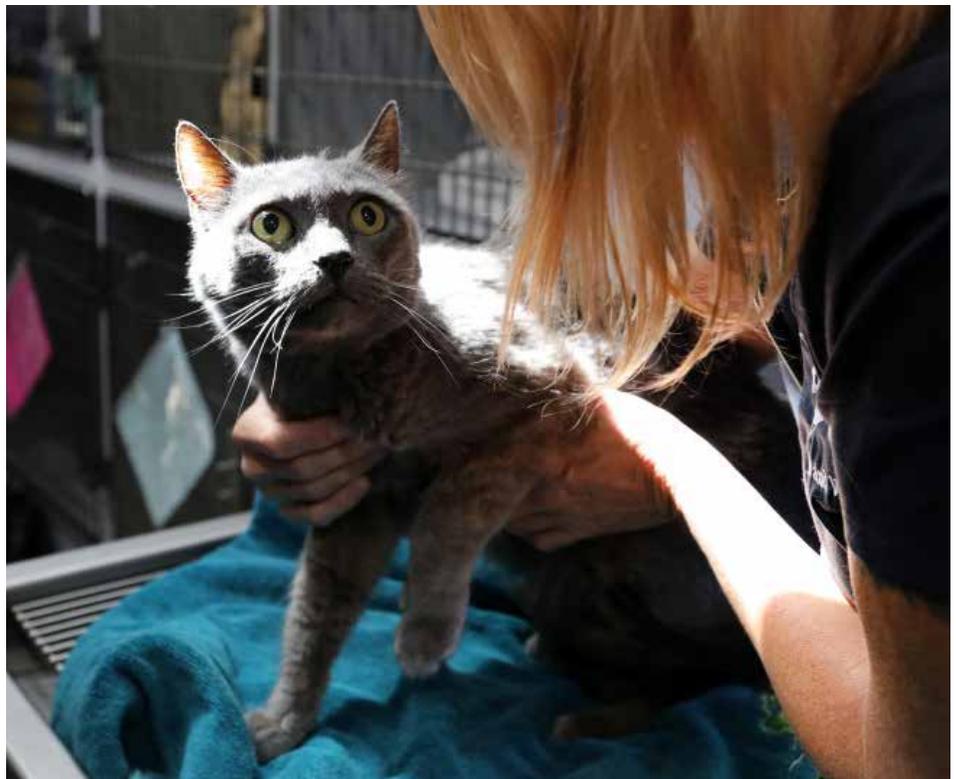
And then there's Winkie, an 11-year-old cat, who can't stop scratching. She belongs to Army veteran Kai Barnwell, of Hayward. Winkie was the cat no one wanted, a feral that a friend's daughter had rescued but couldn't keep. Somehow, Barnwell ended up with her seven years ago.

She's still a bit wild, Barnwell warns Noah. But Winkie is putty in Noah's hands, submitting to an exam and vaccinations without a single yowl. Noah detects a mild heart murmur. It's not a bad one, but it means Winkie should get an annual exam and they might consider a chest X-ray down the road to see if her heart is enlarged. And the itching? Monthly flea treatments will help.

Bubba, Barnwell's Jack Russell terrier mix, is itchy, too. The dog was treated at the clinic two months ago for a flea-related rash, but he's still scratching and biting himself. Noah shaves spots on Bubba's back to reveal angry, red infected patches where he has been chewing. Bubba will be wearing a cone of shame for a few weeks.

"I'm glad I brought him in," Barnwell says as he heads to his car, lugging Winkie's carrier in one hand and holding the leash for a now-coned Bubba in the other. "I love this program."

Dr. Josie Noah, right, examines Winkie during the ARF's Pets and Vets programan in an ARF mobile clinic at the Veterans Medical Center in Livermore, Calif., on Friday, Sept. 7, 2018. Winkie's owner Kai Barnwell, a veteran, brought his dog Bubaa, too, to be treated for a skin infection. The ARF program offers free treatment to veterans' pets. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)