

When you think of the word “community” today—as in right now—what strikes you? Is it fair to say the strength and feeling of that word is diminished? And because of this unusual moment we’re in, do you feel less or more inspired to take action?

I could jump on my soapbox and give a bunch of dry stats, talk about obligation and responsibility, remind you of your oath . . . but action is rarely inspired through facts or figures. It is drawn from emotion. So, I thought I’d share a brief story.

A young veterinarian once found himself at a crossroads. One that he never (ever) imagined: leaving the profession that he worked his whole life to achieve. But a few years into a shelter vet assignment, at a shelter that ranked nationally near the bottom, he began to question his path. He wanted to stop feeling the shame and the guilt. He wanted to save more than he was euthanizing. And he wanted to be happy again. So he made the difficult decision to quit. He wrote his resignation letter and sat in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven that morning contemplating his decision. As he walked out with his coffee, he noticed a man and his dog who appeared to be homeless. The dog was suffering from a terrible skin condition on her rear. And that’s when something happened.

Rather than walking by him as he would normally do, he stepped over, introduced himself and offered help. Turns out the condition that had completely destroyed the skin was nothing more than fleas. The vet said he would return the next morning with a treatment, which took him back to the shelter for one more day. He returned as promised and treated the dog. About ten days later, he ran into the two of them once again—and the dog was transformed! Curled up and depressed before, she was lively and wagging her tail. And the man, sitting in the exact same spot, looked up at the vet with tears in eyes and said: Thank you for not ignoring me.

Before walking away, the vet and the man shared an emotional moment, and the vet made a quiet pledge: I promise to never just walk by again. I will find more like you. In total, it was five minutes of the vet’s time.

The simple moral is this: Sometimes just

moments of your time (and this case some expertise) can change someone’s life—and yours with it.

That was 14 years ago, and I’ve been walking the streets since. It’s worth noting after that encounter, I stayed at the shelter for three more years. And with the help of the city and my amazing team, we turned it into one of the best municipal shelters in the country.

Just know that the stabilizing force in our lives, the magic that makes us human, is looking out for each other. A quick, cool note about serotonin, that necessary little neurotransmitter that stabilizes our mood, dismisses depression, and is important for overall health: You get a spike in serotonin when you are the recipient of an act of kindness (probably no surprise), but you also get a dose as the giver. And maybe the best part, if you are simply the observer of an act of kindness, you also get a surge in serotonin. So, when we talk about “community,” being a part of it and doing our part for it, there is this beautiful scientific and spiritual triangle at work. Next time rather than walking by, just see what five minutes might do.

About the Author

Kwane Stewart is a veterinarian and co-founder of Project Street Pet.