



Melissa Garcia Started Charity to Help Needy Seniors Feed Their Animals

A few years ago, Melissa Garcia, practice manager at Bloomfield Animal Hospital in Lakewood, learned that many low-income seniors who were delivered two meals a day by Meals on Wheels were eating one of those meals and giving the other to their pets.

"Once I heard this, it was heartbreaking," she said. Her reaction was to start a charity to provide pet food to these seniors.

Melissa is one of two recipients for the SCVMA Para-Professional Award for 2021. She was "very shocked" when she learned that she was a recipient. "I am honored that my colleagues think so highly of me that they would nominate me."

Melissa is never comfortable in the spotlight, said Andrea Crabtree, owner of FurPaws Consulting in Orange, who nominated her for the award.

"She's very humble and she's the sweetest person ever. she has a heart of gold – not only for pets but for people. Her heart bleeds for those in need. Her comfort zone is to do things for others, even though that can make her uncomfortable. But she does those things because she knows they need to be done."

Her charity, the Grandpaws Foundation, started slowly. It became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit two years ago that serves Lakewood and Long Beach and is expanding. Besides providing pet food to low-income seniors, it also will help them with veterinary bills.

"In the Latino community," she said, "we always take care of our elders. For me, what these seniors were having to do was not OK."

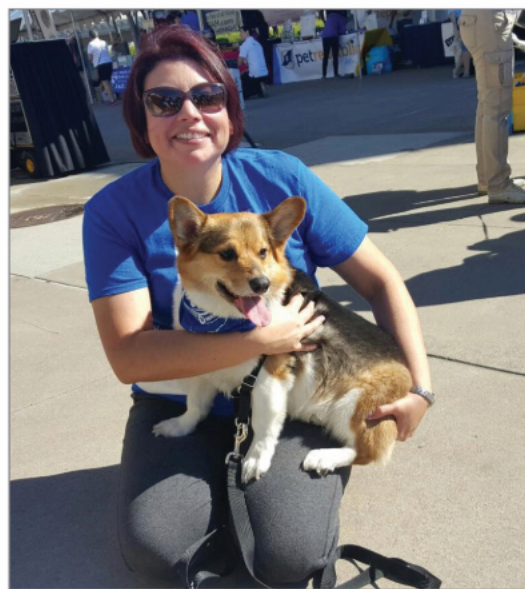
The pandemic has increased demand for Melissa's services. "It was overwhelming and humbling to see how many more seniors we needed to help," she said. "Demand has basically doubled since Covid hit. We were giving seniors 150 to 200 pounds of pet food every week before. Now the need is close to 400 or 500 pounds."

Petfood from Grandpaws enables low-income seniors to eat both Meals on Wheels offerings (one cold and one hot) and not feel the need to feed one of those meals to their pets. "No senior should go hungry and no senior should have to choose between their well-being and their pets' well-being," Melissa said.

Seniors who sign up with Meals on Wheels fill out a questionnaire that asks whether they have a pet and whether it is a dog or a cat. They also are asked if they need petfood. If they indicate a need for petfood, Grandpaws provides it and it is delivered weekly by Meals on Wheels.

Grandpaws is surviving because of the generosity of the veterinary industry, Melissa said. "Hospitals call me and they say: 'Hey, Melissa, we have these bags of food we don't need any more so come pick them up.' The veterinary community has been a godsend. Once the pandemic hit, I really worried about how we were going to maintain the amount of food we were giving – and on top of that we were needing more. But so far, we have been very blessed."

Hospitals frequently call her and tell her that they have extra petfood that she can pick up or that they had a petfood drive and



there is an excess that she can have. There are also private donors who contribute.

Melissa has worked at Bloomfield since 2007. She grew up in Lakewood and now lives in her own home not far from her parents' house.

"I'm a first generation American," she said. "My family is just my parents, my younger sister and me. My mom is from Guatemala and my dad is from Columbia. My mom immigrated here when she was 17 and my dad came here when he was 21."

"I was born in New York but my parents came to Southern California when my dad, an engineer, was offered a job at McDonnell Douglas." Her mother, she said, worked as an accountant in New York.

Melissa earned a B.S. degree in zoology at Long Beach State, then moved to Colorado, where she earned a veterinary tech certificate at Bel-Rea Institute of Animal Technology in Aurora. "After six years in Colorado and my fifth or sixth blizzard, I said to myself, 'I'm done with this,' and I moved back to Southern California."

She has been a practice manager 10 years. She said that Dr. Jose Arambulo, who owns Bloomfield Hospital, is the reason she still works there. "He's a good boss, a good leader, a good teacher. The staff has great respect for him and what he does for our practice."

She credits, Dr. A., as she calls him, with playing an import role in the beginnings of Grandpaws and in its support. She said that any senior in Southern California can apply for petfood help with the charity and "we can drop it off to them." **P**