

Vets in a time of need

Through tough times, animals can become our sanctuary. But what happens when we can't offer them the same back? StreetVet is a charity providing free vet services to homeless people across the UK. From microchips to major surgery, we found out more about the work that this life-changing organisation does

Writing | **Kathryn Wheeler**

It's a cold Sunday afternoon, and London's Oxford Street is heaving. I follow volunteer vet Holly-Anne Hills and senior volunteer vet Gabriel Galea as they briskly navigate their way through the crowds of shoppers. A man is sitting against a building, a ball of blankets on his lap. As Gabriel approaches, the man spots him and silently pulls the blankets aside, revealing the head of a sleepy black and white cat. This is Valentine, the first of nine StreetVet clients we will meet today.

Coming together

Founded in 2017 by two vets, Jade Statt and Sam Joseph, every week volunteer vets head out across 15 different towns and cities to treat and care for street dogs, the occasional cat, and one rabbit. In London alone, StreetVet has 50 vet and nurse volunteers working with more than 200 registered

patients. Offering weekly drop-in clinics, as well as outreach programmes like the one I was with, they vaccinate, microchip, and treat minor and major illnesses alike, as well as handing out necessities like food, dog-jackets, blankets, and medication.

Later in the week, I catch up with Jade, who tells me that she was inspired to start volunteering on the streets after a night out in 2016.

"I met a gentleman and his dog," Jade explains. "The dog didn't have anything dramatically wrong, just bad skin, but you could see how helpless he felt. I thought, I could fix this so easily if I had my stuff with me."

So Jade took to the streets to offer her veterinary skills – calling herself 'Street Vet'. Later that year, she found Sam on Facebook, doing the same thing and using the same name. The pair met up, and decided to join forces. They registered StreetVet as a not-for-

profit organisation in 2017, before going on to be given charity status in early 2019.

The human touch

Back out in London, Gabriel carries a backpack and a huge suitcase, stuffed with necessities. On the corner of a street, opposite one of the most affluent shopping parades in the city, we find Brian and his two Jack Russells, Rain and Mist. Gabriel hands Brian a 'human bag' (fresh fruit and a drink), and then opens his suitcase to top him up with dog food, poo bags, and a new toy each for Rain and Mist.

After Gabriel and Holly-Anne have finished checking the two dogs over, Brian tells me how StreetVet was there for him through Rain's cancer scare.

"They're a godsend for us," Brian says. "I think they're kind people – a proper charity. I do anything that I can to help them."



In London alone, StreetVet has more than 200 registered patients



At the time we met, Brian, Rain, and Mist were due to make their TV debut on an upcoming series looking at the special relationship we have with dogs – and Brian explains that he'd happily take any opportunity to support StreetVet.

That someone who has lost almost everything wants to give back to a charity, speaks volumes to the hard work of volunteers like Gabriel and Holly-Anne. Gabriel later tells me that, while he originally got involved with StreetVet for the animals, he stays for the people – and that he would

miss the Sunday outreach if he didn't do it once a week – and I can believe it. The sun sets and the temperature drops but, as we continue to work our way through the city, Gabriel's energy never falters.

A friend through hard times

A few hours and several street-level checkups later, in an underpass in Shoreditch we meet up with Street Kitchen – the local grassroots organisation that supported StreetVet's first regular station, and offered guidance in

the beginning – where we pick up boxes of hot pasta to hand out as we continue on our route.

We're looking for Mitch and his Staffy, Benson. After a short walk, Gabriel spots them about 15 metres away. He kneels to the ground and Benson comes bounding up the pavement to meet him. For Benson, this is a game, for Gabriel it's all part of the check-up.

Benson has been in Mitch's life for eight years. "He's my boy – he's the only one who puts up with me," says Mitch. "I have no mental >>>



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StreetVet can only keep doing the incredible work that they do with your support. To donate to the charity, get information on fundraising, or browse their Amazon wish list, where you can purchase much-needed supplies for the animals StreetVet support, head to streetvet.co.uk/get-involved



Gabriel with Kaiser

health support, but he keeps my head straight. He's my reason for everything."

In 2014, a study by Homeless Link found that 80% of homeless people in England reported mental health problems, with 45% having been diagnosed with a condition. Being aware of what this might mean when treating people's animals, Jade explains how this comes into play when considering the way that StreetVet has evolved to offer its service.

"A lot of the people who we're helping have slipped through the cracks – they don't trust society," Jade explains. "So I think that's what works so well because we're seeing them in their own environment. Also, it's a slow burner. We're in the same place week in week out, they get to know us and trust that we're working with them, not against them."

"Benson looks forward to seeing them," says Mitch. "All I have to say is: 'Doggy doctors!' And he's like, 'Where?!'"

A clean bill of health

When asked whether there's a story from the past two years that really stands out in her mind, Jade instantly recalls Sally and her owner Rob.

On a night in November, Sally was spooked by some fireworks and ran away from Rob on to a railway line, straight into the path of an oncoming train. Sally's injuries were life-threatening but, incredibly, she was still alive when the team got to her.

"Rob had been one of our clients for a long time and he knew what to do," Jade explains. "He called

our out-of-hours team, they went down and Sally was recovered from the railway.

"She lost an eye and a leg, and she was in the vets for about two weeks. For Rob, it was a massive thing to be apart from his dog for that long. But what was really lovely was that the team all knew him so well already.

"It's those owners who you've been through something pretty big with, and then come out the other side – that's special. That was a time when I realised that this was really needed, and that the system we've got in place was working – because if StreetVet didn't exist, that dog would not be with him anymore."

Unconditional love

Our last stop of the night was with Jason and Peppy – another Staffy – who we meet outside London Liverpool Street Station. As Gabriel begins his check-up, we're moved on by a TFL staff member, a reminder – after a day mostly filled with hope, no doubt prompted by the energy of the animals – of the realities of homelessness.

Jason tells me that he has had Peppy since she was a puppy, and that she's 10 years old now. When I ask him what Peppy means to him, Jason doesn't know where to start.

"She's like a best friend. It's the company, they're always there – it's very therapeutic," he says. "You're never sad too long when you have a dog, they make you happy.

"The dog loves you, and it doesn't matter what you have or what you don't have, or what you have lost. They just want to be with you – and the more they are with you, the happier you are."



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▼ *StreetVet founders Sam Joseph and Jade Statt*

Photography (bottom right) | Robin Trow Photography

Gabriel fills Jason's bag with supplies, we part ways, and head into the Tube station.

That day, I was struck by two things. The first, the incredible dedication of the StreetVet volunteers – their selflessness, personability, and skill.

The second was that of the affinity between a person and their animal. Little is comparable to the strength of the bonds that I saw that day. We all crave companionship; it's what sustains us, no matter what our circumstances. But the companionship that flourishes on the streets is an anchor, and the animals a life force. And if that life force dims, on cruel winter nights, through hostility, vulnerability, and in times of illness, StreetVet are there to patch it up. And so they face another day – a person and their animal, together, against the world.

Find out more about StreetVet and their invaluable work at streetvet.co.uk

