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Interviews with Jessika Ava

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **JESSIKA AVA** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 229.*

JASMIN: Jessika Ava has been working for animal rights in various capacities for over 10 years. Her work has ranged from elephant conservation and primate behavior to food policy and vegan advocacy. She received a Bachelor of Science in biology, Masters of Public Administration, and in the fall she will begin her PhD in biostatistics. Jessika is on the board of directors of Street Dog Care, which you can find at [streetdogcare.org](#); Out to Pasture Farm Sanctuary, which you can find at [outtopasturesanctuary.org](#); and Help Animals India, which you can find at [helpanimalsindia.org](#). She currently lives in Kathmandu, helping the city's street dogs, and when in the States, she shares her Portland, Oregon home with a much loved three-and-a-half-legged street dog from Nepal.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Jessika.

JESSIKA: Hello, thank you for having me back.

JASMIN: You are the first person that we are interviewing from Kathmandu, so this is a first in Our Hen House.

JESSIKA: Great.

JASMIN: So we have so much to talk to you about. And I would just really like it if you started us off by telling us a little bit about the street dogs of Kathmandu. Like, I just need a bit of a visual here. How do they live? What do they eat? Where do they sleep? Just give us a picture here.

JESSIKA: Okay. So there are, we estimate, about 25,000 street dogs within the Kathmandu valley. And within the region where our organization works, there are a few thousand here. And so these dogs, they essentially live out on the streets. They eat from the garbage bins; there's unfortunately not the best public sanitation here, so there's a lot of garbage on the streets, which provides a lot of food for them. And they will stay kind of in their same territory for most of their life. A lot of them will live -- families will live in the same area for generations. And you'll find packs that are created from family members and close friends. And they just kind of live out on the streets and do their thing out there.

MARIANN: So do you feel that they have okay lives, more or less?

JESSIKA: Yeah, so this really depends on where the dogs are. Like, it differs from country to city. It always differs. But as far as the dogs in our region who we take care of, they have a very good life, for the most part. There are always exceptions of course, but for the most part they have a very good life because since we've been here we've actually been able to impact public perception of the dogs. So now local people are beginning to see the dogs as more -- they're beginning to treat them more friendly, and they're beginning to feed them. So, many people will feed the dogs who live on the streets outside of their shops or outside of their homes, whereas before we came in maybe about five years ago, people may have been kind of scaring away the dogs or throwing rocks at the dogs or what have you. Now you'll see people kind of hugging the dogs and putting leashes and collars on the dogs and all the dogs have names now, so within our area the dogs have a pretty good life. Unfortunately this isn't the case for all street dogs across the world, but within our region that we work, I would say yeah, they have a really good life. They're happy for the most part.

JASMIN: Let's take a step back. Tell me a little bit about what you're doing in Kathmandu and like, what your day to day consists of. What organization are you working with while you're there, as well?

JESSIKA: Okay. I'm on the board of directors of a very special little NGO called Street Dog Care, and we've been around for about five years now. And we actually just provide medical care, veterinary care, to the street dogs within our region, and we also do vaccinations and we facilitate international adoptions at times. And then we do a lot of public education, like I was talking about before. And then we also just do small things that make for a better quality of life for them, so we give them food and water and flea collars and baths and sweaters when it's cold. And so my day to day life here, it differs. Every single day is different. Some days are very calm; other days are very chaotic. But maybe somebody will bring a dog into us. Somebody from the local community will bring in a dog who has been injured and we'll take that dog to the vet and then he comes back to our dog care center and he stays there until he's fully recovered. And then after he's recovered for the most part we typically will release them back to their homes onto the streets.

JASMIN: So I have done some traveling to countries where there have been like just dogs everywhere, for example, Puerto Rico or Grenada. And it's just really, really jarring. It's just so viscerally disturbing. And I know that Mariann has brought up the point that we just aren't used to seeing that here, but of course here in the United States these dogs and cats and other animals are rounded up and brought to quote-unquote "shelters" and frequently not adopted out, are frequently killed. So can you talk a little bit about the difference to you in the way that the dog scene is in Kathmandu and in other areas where there's street dogs versus what we see here in the United States and how that affects you?

JESSIKA: Yeah. And I was the same when I first encountered street dogs. It is very jarring and it's very emotional too. But I think that a lot of people who come from Western countries like the United States, they're comparing these dogs to full bred housedogs like we have in the United States. But the street dogs, they have actually had the opportunity to evolve through natural selection, to live on the streets, whereas housedogs have been at some point in history bred by humanity for a specific purpose. So they never really had the ability to learn these skills and evolve these skills that will allow them to live successfully on the streets, whereas the street dogs have.

JASMIN: I'm completely fascinated by that. I didn't know that at all, but I guess I just wanted to know your general reaction now and how it's changed because my mother was just in Argentina. She came back and was completely floored and was so scarred. And I said, I'm not sure if there's reason to be that much more scarred there. In a way I'd rather know what's going on right in front of me and have the opportunity to fix it. But then again, I feel like I'm flying blind. I have no idea how to fix this problem.

JESSIKA: Yeah. And again, it's different in every single country. Some dogs have a worse life, but as far as the dogs here in our area, they're fairly happy on the street. I don't, and our organization, Street Dog Care, we don't see the street dogs as a problem. Many organizations, many NGOs who work with street dogs, they do see it as an issue and their ultimate aim is to eliminate the population. But for us, we see them -- this is their home. This is their society. This is how they live. And it's true they may have mange. Maybe they're dirty. Maybe they're a little bit skinny. But this is how they've always lived, so who are we to come in and take them away from their society and put them into our houses just because we feel that that's where they belong, when they actually have evolved to be on the streets? This is their life. It's different than what we're accustomed to seeing, but after I've spent a few years being around them, I've come to realize that they're very, very different than American dogs, than full bred dogs or even mutts. And this is just their life. It is a little bit jarring, and in some regions of the world, yes, it's bad and something does need to be done to help them become healthier and help society accept them more. But within our specific region, it's not so bad and they're okay. They're, for the most part, very healthy and happy, and they have good food and it's okay. It's not a problem.

MARIANN: It sounds like one of the differences between places where it is a problem and places where it's not is the fact that your organization is doing this kind of work and that must make a big difference. Can you talk a little bit about exactly what Street Dog Care does?

JESSIKA: Yeah, so we provide medical care for the dogs and we also do a lot of public education campaigns. And this has helped tremendously because once the people see us being friendly to the dogs and us not being a fright to the dogs, then they themselves will be friendlier to the dogs. And then since the dogs are being treated friendly, then the dogs will trust humans and they're less likely to bite. And this is a cycle, and then people are less afraid of them. And we also do a rabies campaign, which we actually just did this last weekend. We vaccinated almost 900 dogs for rabies. So we just went out onto the streets and went to the dogs directly and vaccinated them. So this helps community perception a lot because then they're not afraid of the dogs becoming rabid with rabies and being dangerous. And we also do international adoptions sometimes, so that kind of helps the issue for dogs who for whatever reason, maybe they -- we have a lot of dogs who have come in now who have been hit by cars because traffic has become so much more of an issue the last couple of years, and some of the dogs have paralyzed back legs and they can't go back out onto the streets, so we help with adoptions with that. And yeah.

JASMIN: That's so amazing. I remember I was mentioning Puerto Rico. Well, when we were in Puerto Rico, we were actually able to, we were lucky enough to be part of a small team of like three of us who rescued a dog who had also been hit by a car, I think. His paws were flattened. But we wound up finding him a home with someone in Florida and I swear I

want this guy in Florida to adopt me. Like, this dog is living the life, so it's nice to hear that you do those adoptions.

MARIANN: Yeah, and I understand that you yourself adopted a dog from Nepal. Can you tell us about that?

JESSIKA: Yes! Yes, I did. Her name is Luna, and I adopted her, it's been, almost four years ago now. And she came into the dog center, she had been hit by a car and one of her legs was amputated, and all three of her other legs were injured, so she was just covered in bandages. She wasn't able to stand on her own so I had to hold her up to eat and to drink and she became very, very attached to me. And essentially I say that she adopted me because she just became so attached to me that she was very, very afraid when I was not there, so I accepted her adoption and brought her back to the United States. And we had a bit of an issue coming back to the United States. We got stranded in Delhi, India for about a week.

JASMIN: What?

JESSIKA: Yeah. Yeah, so we went from Kathmandu to Delhi, and we had issues with the airlines and they wouldn't let her fly all of a sudden. And at this point I didn't know anybody in Delhi, so I was just stuck in the middle of the night with a dog and my luggage in this huge city. But it ended up being okay, and then a couple weeks later we ended up in the United States, and everything was okay and now she's very happy.

JASMIN: Wow. Well, that's definitely a bonding experience if nothing else. But especially given your relationship with Luna and all of the work you do, does it ever trouble you to have to release the dogs back onto the street? Or do you just kind of think, "Well, they're okay, they're going to be okay, they have communication and social circles in ways that I don't understand"? How does that affect you?

JESSIKA: Yeah, so I'm okay releasing them back on the street. I think that a lot of people who aren't okay with this, they're kind of comparing them to our American house dogs. With like Rose, it would be horribly cruel to just throw her out on the street and abandon her. But for the dogs here, it's not like that. They evolved to live on the street, they know how to live on the streets. They have their packs, they have their families, they have best friends. And they have -- they're well taken care of by us and they're fed by many people who live in the area. So it's okay. Yeah, I don't have a problem with it. And typically people who maybe at first when they come here they have an issue with it, but once they have enough time to see how it actually is and see how the dogs actually -- they love their freedom, they love having the ability to go where they want to go. And then people, they accept it and they don't really have an issue with it anymore.

MARIANN: So is the main reason that dogs end up with you that they're injured?

JESSIKA: Yeah, for the most part they're injured. Maybe they've been hit by a car, what have you. But we also have a lot of dogs who come in with mange, horrible mange skin disease. And there's also a tumor that affects the reproductive organs that are very common in the street dogs here and many street dogs across the world. And it's actually one of the oldest diseases in the world, interesting, and it kind of works as a natural birth control and a natural population control. But unfortunately we get a lot of these dogs who

come in, so then we have to do surgery on them. But for the most part, those are the reasons why the dogs come in.

MARIANN: Do you do spaying and neutering, or do you not?

JESSIKA: We do spay and neutering, but it's not our priority. Like, for many NGOs, street dog NGOs, their priority is to just stop the population from growing completely. But our priority is to end the suffering that is occurring right now in the present moment. So our priority is taking these dogs that have been injured or what have you and to let them recover. And we do spay and neuter, but we don't do it on a massive scale. And another reason that we're doing that is because our organization is based on a foundation of Buddhist philosophy, and to make a very long story short, essentially by sterilizing a dog it's akin to taking away lives, so that would be very difficult to do within this Buddhist community. We would lose a lot of the community's support if we did this mass sterilization. And so yeah, that's what we do. We don't do the mass sterilization, but only at times do we do the population. We also find that within our region -- of course I can't speak for every street dog in the world, but within our region the population stays at a nice equilibrium. It doesn't grow out of control just because we're not doing spay and neuter. A lot of the dogs get this reproductive organ tumor like I said, and that kind of works as nature's way of keeping the population at a nice equilibrium. And also just, they don't have as long of lives as house dogs do, so when it's their time to go, they go and the population stays okay. It doesn't really grow out of proportion and become an issue.

JASMIN: Now, when you're back home, you live in the Pacific Northwest, right?

JESSIKA: Yeah, that's correct.

JASMIN: And so what made you connect with this incredible organization, Street Dog Care?

JESSIKA: So I was traveling in India about five years ago, and just through word of mouth I discovered this organization. And it was just starting when I found it, and I ended up living at the dog center for a few months and taking care of all of these healing dogs. And I fell in love with the organization and became very close friends with the founder and just stayed involved over the years, and it's become part of my life.

JASMIN: So what is life like in Kathmandu?

JESSIKA: So life in Kathmandu is very chaotic, very frustrating. It's very dirty, it's very polluted. But with all of those negative things set aside, there's also something about it and about many of these Asian countries that you can't get in the United States. It's hard to explain but it's very -- it's reality. Like, in the United States, many of these negative things are kind of hidden behind closed doors. We just don't see them. It's like living in a dream essentially. But living here, everything is out in the open, and it's just... it's real. It's as if you're living life how it is actually supposed to be lived. And another thing is that -- I don't like the term "spiritual," but I'll just use that for lack of a better term -- there's a certain spiritual element living here that you don't get within a capitalist society. So that's nice too.

JASMIN: Well, on some level that kind of goes with what you said about why you don't take huge measures with the dogs and you kind of let them live out their lives. It goes back to the reality and just like, we're just trying to create less suffering. Does that resonate with you?

JESSIKA: Exactly. Yes, it does completely. Like, in the United States, we would have street dogs, but we round them up and take them to shelters, which is okay. That works for the United States, so it's great for the United States. I'm not arguing against that by any means. But here it's just, it is what it is, and we just kind of have to accept life as it is and make it as best as we possibly can.

JASMIN: And what's it like being vegan in Kathmandu?

JESSIKA: It's very, very easy to be vegan here. It's very easy. There are vegetable markets and vegetable stands *everywhere*, and it's so inexpensive. It's local produce. There's fresh tofu everywhere. Very, very cheap; very tasty. Very easy to be vegan here. I would say it's more difficult to not be vegan, to go out of your way to find dairy products.

JASMIN: Wow, that's so interesting. So how can people get involved with Street Dog Care? I know you have a website, streetdogcare.org, and you're also on Facebook at facebook.com/streetdogcare. But if someone's listening to this and they're as moved as I am in hearing about this organization and your efforts, what's the best way they can help?

JESSIKA: Okay, we take in volunteers, all different types of volunteers, and also sponsors if anybody would like to sponsor one of our dogs. So the best way is to contact me directly. Can I give my email address?

JASMIN: Oh yeah, totally.

JESSIKA: Okay. So my email is Jessika [DOT] Ava [AT] streetdogcare.org. And you can just email me.

JASMIN: Well, I think it's really amazing what you're doing. And I love hearing about this organization and I have no doubt that some people listening to this will get involved. And I just really appreciate everything you're out there doing when you're in Kathmandu and when you're back here, just changing the world for animals on so many levels. And I hope that you'll stay in touch with us and keep us up to speed on your many world travels to change the world for animals. Thank you for joining us again today, Jessika.

JESSIKA: It was my pleasure, thank you. Thank you so much.

JASMIN: That was Jessika Ava. You could learn more at streetdogcare.org.