

## Celebrating Veterinary Technicians: Animal Nurses

By Brandy Aguilar    Photos MCC & PMI

National Veterinary Technician Week is Oct. 13-19. It's a chance to say thank you to the veterinary technician at your vet's office for their care and commitment to your furry loved one's health.

**Phoenix Dog Magazine** says thanks by featuring the veterinary technician programs at the East Valley Pima Medical Institute (PMI) and Mesa Community College (MCC).

"I worked in a clinic back in Idaho and that's where I fell in love with the work," said Natalie Kilgore. Kilgore is a veterinary technician student at the East Valley PMI campus. "I was only a kennel assistant, but I got to assist in technician work and it was just something that just called to me and I have to do this."

"When I was a little girl, I used to make my own surgical exam report cards, so I always knew I would end up somewhere in the veterinary field," Diana Lehigh said. Lehigh is the veterinary technology residential faculty instructor and clinical coordinator at MCC, and she's a graduate of the program.

A passion for helping animals led these women down a path to the veterinary technology field.



**Diana Lehigh & Kimberly Focht, DVM, with Jasper at MCC**

"The hands-on was definitely a big reason for coming to PMI," Kilgore said. "It teaches you a lot, but going on externship was a huge part of the learning experience."

"Having a smaller cohort, 24 students in the MCC program, it's really more personal between instructors and the students and we definitely get a closer bond," Lehigh said.

PMI and MCC are two of Arizona's five veterinary technician programs accredited through the American Veterinary Medical Association. Both schools offer hands-on learning for students, including fieldwork with small animals, large animals, emergency and specialty medicine along with community partnerships.

"We really put them in a real-world scenario with our program so that they're ready on that first day to go out and succeed in the profession," said Dr. Kimberly Focht, MCC veterinary technology program director. MCC students have the opportunity to take care of animals that live

on campus full time, including rabbits, rats and Nigerian dwarf goats. They also treat dogs and cats the school receives from the Maricopa County Animal Care & Control. "You can lecture and lecture all day long, but until you're actually doing the hands-on technical skills, that's what helps the students to succeed when they're actually out in practice," Lehigh said.

"We work through rescues," said Dr. Julie Lucas, East Valley PMI veterinary technician program director. "They supply all of the dogs and cats for our students to learn their skills."



**Julie Lucas, DVM, instructs students in the East Valley PMI lab classroom**

PMI's East Valley campus works with the Central Arizona Animal Rescue and Wistful Whiskers Cat Rescue.

"Every student that I interview for the veterinary technician program, I ask them, 'What is it about Pima Medical that made you want to come here?' I would say 99 percent of them say for hands-on learning," Lucas said.

The real-life experience is important as students learn how to work with all animals and ultimately decide what area they want to specialize in after earning their associate degree.

"I think people go into this thinking, 'Oh, I don't like people and I want to work with animals,' but owners are right there along with it," Kilgore said. "You have to be a people person and showing that bit of your compassionate side and understanding side to the owners can really change the experience for them."

"Vet techs are the backbone of the clinic, really veterinarians couldn't do what they do without the veterinary technician," Focht said. "The veterinarian is there for diagnosing and prescribing and figuring out the medical plan and the vet tech is there to be able to execute that plan. They do a lot of soft skills because they work with the client directly, routinely, and sometimes clients will tell vet techs more than they tell us because they feel more comfortable with them."

If you're interested in learning more about these two veterinary technician programs, visit:

<https://www.mesacc.edu/programs/veterinary-technology>  
<https://pmi.edu/programs/associate/veterinary-technician>