

Myka Bailey:

What's up, podcast world? Welcome to season two of I Am WT. This is Myka Bailey.

Thomas Rodriguez:

And I'm Thomas Rodriguez. And today we are joined with a very special guest, Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer, and another special guest.

Myka Bailey:

Yes, we have a furry friend with us. Her name is Willow Kate.

Thomas Rodriguez:

She's adorable little dog. So we can start with, I guess, how did you get Willow Kate, the dog?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

My husband and I got her as a puppy. We're yellow Labrador Retriever people, so that's always the breed for us. And so we got her when she was about seven weeks old and her older sister, Ivy Jane, when I was in Alabama at Auburn University, she was a therapy dog and so fast-forward to here and now Willow Kate's a registered therapy dog. So we're a team, we get to work together.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Okay.

Myka Bailey:

Cute.

Thomas Rodriguez:

So you told us about the dog. Now tell us about yourself. Where are you from, where'd you go to school, that kind of stuff.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Sure. I am originally from Florida, so I grew up just north of Tampa. Long way away from the panhandle of Texas.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Quite a bit.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yeah. And I did undergrad and then I went on to veterinary school at the University of Florida. I was there for about seven and a half years, long time in school. And then a little while after that, married my husband who's a large animal veterinarian. So we've moved around throughout the country and so we were at Auburn, like I mentioned, and I got a master's in adult education while I was at Auburn. So, yeah.

Myka Bailey:

What made you want to do vet school?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

So I'm the daughter of a veterinarian. My dad was a veterinarian, so I grew up around it, worked with my dad all my life, did all the things in the clinic. Other than thinking that I wasn't going to pass physics, which is a requirement for vet school, it was always vet school.

Myka Bailey:

Gotcha. So you knew from when, little, little, or? Yeah, okay.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yeah. Probably 4, 5, 6.

Myka Bailey:

Oh wow. Okay.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yeah, which is actually for a lot of veterinarians, quite common.

Myka Bailey:

That's good to know because my little sister, she's 14 and she's been saying she wants to be a vet for forever. I'm like, "Do you really know yet?" Maybe she does. Maybe she does.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yeah, she might know. I think the other thing sometimes too is, which is kind of cool the way things have developed. If you love animals, then veterinary medicine seems like an obvious career choice. But the cool thing is these days you love animals, there are lots of career paths that you can choose. So it's good to know.

Thomas Rodriguez:

You said you're from Florida? From my understanding, because I've been there a couple of times, it's like an 18-hour drive. What drew you to WT?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Right.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Willow is roaming.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

That's right.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Sorry, everyone. Come on.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Come over here.

Like I said before, I'm married to a large animal veterinarian and so I always say we follow the cows. So he's actually a dairy veterinarian and I don't know if you've looked around, but there are a lot of dairy cattle in our area as well as a lot of beef cattle. So he got a job with the new Texas A&M VERO program, the new vet program, which is what brought us out here.

Thomas Rodriguez:

So was it like a big change for you then, because from my understanding, Tampa's pretty big. It's like a city.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yeah, Tampa is huge. I haven't lived there in a while. We moved here from Alabama, but it was still a really big change. Alabama, it's a smaller town, it's still bigger than Canyon, lot of trees, high humidity. So there are some similarities in regards to kind of an agricultural type, more rural basis. Not like urban Tampa, but still it is very, very different out here.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Yeah, I'm from the Houston area, so it was a big change. I was like, it's so dry up here.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yes.

Thomas Rodriguez:

You guys aren't sweating the second you step outside, that's weird.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I always tell people because I'm not sure I knew about the panhandle before moving out here and I sometimes feel like the rest of the state of Texas also doesn't know about the panhandle because it's so different climate wise, elevation, all the things.

Thomas Rodriguez:

One of my friends back home are like, "Where do you go to school?" I'm like, "It's difficult to put on a map, but..."

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Right. Yeah. Or people will ask me, anybody that's in Florida, my relatives, they're like, "Are you close to..." And I'm like, "I'm going to stop you right there. I'm not close to anything that you know in the state of Texas."

Thomas Rodriguez:

Just a great university in the middle of nowhere. Don't worry about it.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

That's exactly right.

Myka Bailey:

Amen. It's the best.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I agree. I think it is the best. I also think it's the best part of Texas. No offense to Houston.

Thomas Rodriguez:

I mean, that's fair. We don't have too much going for us. I don't know. U of H did not want to go there. There's a reason it's got a nickname. Anyways, so you were brought to WT. Do you teach here?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I do. I'm on faculty, yes.

Thomas Rodriguez:

What classes do you teach?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

So I am the long professor of companion animal studies and the director of the new Companion Animal Program. So I teach two companion animal classes, Companion Animal Science one and two, mostly about cats and dogs.

Myka Bailey:

Yay. So do you have a favorite or can you not pick?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I would have always said it was yellow Labrador Retrievers. But in, I would say, the last ... No, that's not true. Growing up I had Persians. I always had long-eared cats. They were always gray. I always named them some kind of human name. I had Alex and Ben, and so I loved cats growing up and then I kind of switched over to dogs. But as we have come to learn more about felines and learn more about cats, I find that I love them more and more and more. I think it would probably be a tossup between a cat and a dog, but yeah.

Myka Bailey:

Do you have a fun fact that you love sharing about a cat or a dog that you could just be like, "Oh, I have to tell y'all this."

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Fun fact? That's a tough one off the cuff. I'd have to think about that. I think the main thing, and it's not a specific fact, but there's been a saying for a while that cats are not small dogs. But I think the more we learn about cats, the more we learn that cats are actually semi-domesticated. And by that I mean they haven't been domesticated for as long as dogs and they function a whole lot more like wild cats. And so

a well-fed house cat that has all the food that he or she needs to eat will still stop what they're doing to hunt if given the opportunity. And that means anything from a moth or a fly in the house to small rodents, to birds, to snakes, doesn't matter.

Thomas Rodriguez:

I was thinking about it and I was like, that does make sense because my biggest cat, Penelope, at home, she definitely stops whatever she's doing, because she eats a lot. She's pretty chunky, but she'll stop what she's doing if she sees a moth or a cockroach or something, she just runs after it immediately.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Exactly. Yeah. They have really, really good eyesight. They have an incredible ability to hear those small noises as well as a good smell. So it makes all of those things, even for the domesticated house cat still able to hunt really well.

Thomas Rodriguez:

So does your class have anything to say about when cats are standing outside of your door at three in the morning shouting at you as loud as they can?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yeah. We talk a lot about...

Thomas Rodriguez:

The dog got tangled. There we go.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

We talk a lot about enrichment and socialization and things to do that help cognitively, because again, if they're able to do, knowing that they would most of the time just prefer to be outside where there is so much to do, we bring them into the house, then we have to look for things to engage their brain, to help them exercise, because the more that they are tired and relaxed, the less they're going to stand outside your bedroom door and howl at 3:00 AM.

Thomas Rodriguez:

So basically they need to play more is what I'm hearing.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

That's right.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Okay. That's probably a good idea. I don't know. I think about that and I'm like, but cats are always napping all day.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Which is also part of the problem, right? Because that is when they are inclined to sleep more, especially in the afternoon, catnaps is a real thing, but then they start to get going as the light starts to dim

because that creates a better atmosphere when they're prone to want to hunt. And if they don't have the opportunity to hunt, then they're going to play or howl at your door.

Thomas Rodriguez:

So they're just excited that it's nighttime.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

That's right. That's right.

Myka Bailey:

So are they almost nocturnal?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I wouldn't quite call them nocturnal because I think early morning hours moving into the first part of the day, they might still be inclined to be more active. But from that middle of the day on, and if you think about it, if they're going to be outside, that's typically going to be the warmer part of the day is when they're going to curl up somewhere, take a good nap because wildlife, whatever they might hunt, is also going to be sleeping during those parts of the day. So you can really start to see not just the wildcats like bobcats, the smaller ones, but even if we think about the big cats, there are so many similarities between our small domesticated cats and the big ones when we think about behavior and the way they act and the things that they do, it's kind of cool.

Myka Bailey:

Yeah. Totally a nerd and I love it because me too. Maybe not about animals, but I do have my things.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yes.

Myka Bailey:

You said that you also are in charge of a program here.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yes.

Thomas Rodriguez:

We're going to get to that after the break.

Myka Bailey:

Okay.

Thomas Rodriguez:

After the break, we will talk about the Companion Animal Science program here at WT and Dr. Newcomer's involvement in making that a reality. Stay tuned.

Speaker 4:

Donors to West Texas A&M University give more than their material support. They devote time, expertise, and commitment. WT would not be what it is today without individuals dedicated to our forward progress.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Welcome back to the I Am WT podcast. We are with our special guests, Dr. Newcomer and our other special guest, Willow Kate, hanging out on the floor. Dr. Newcomer, last year WT received a gift to establish a new Companion Animal Science program. How did that happen?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yes, so Dr. Russell and Mrs. Natrell Long, Dr. Long was our ... President Long, I guess, is a past president of WT and they were instrumental in developing programs and in growing the university when they were here as the president and have continued to have an interest in supporting WT. And so as they think about the legacy that they want to leave besides what they have already done at WT, which was significant, they talked about how their passions involved WT students and companion animals. They're both cat lovers. They have a cat, her name is Jody, and they had recently adopted her. And so in looking for their new cat, they had gone to the shelters and were really kind of troubled, I guess I could say, in regards to the lack of funding, the needs that are there. And so they wanted to think about what would it look like to leave a legacy supporting WT students and the animals in our area. Discussions were ongoing trying to figure out what would that look like.

Their interest specifically is a shelter management program, but the leadership where I was brought into, so not just me, but decided that we needed to expand it beyond that. That's where the vision for a companion animal program came about. Within that program then is the opportunity to educate about overpopulation, to talk about what does socialization look like for animals, how can we educate the public about cats and dogs specifically that is going to help to support them to be the pet owners to try to prevent animals from ending up in the shelter, which is the heart of the Longs in essence. And so as God would have it, I would say, better than luck, I had been here in a previous position and was considering it, ended up getting brought in. My background, being a small animal veterinarian, it kind of works to support it. I've been developing two classes that will work in conjunction with a number of other classes that are already offered primarily through the Department of Life, Earth and Environmental Science within the Paul Engler College of Ag and Natural Sciences. So students have the opportunity as of this semester to get a certificate or a minor in companion animal studies.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Wow. That's a lot of backstory that made this program into what it is. That's really cool to see. For those who may not know or understand, why are companion animals important?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I think it's important to acknowledge that when I say companion animal, what I mean is pet. The pet industry has exploded. The companion animal industry, in essence, worldwide is a multi-billion dollar industry. So we're talking about a lot of money that people spend on their pets. So we had a conversation previously, and Thomas, you talked about having cats.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Yes.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

And Myka, you talked about having fish. And so you'll be interested to know that the top three animals that are owned as pets in the US first is dogs, second is cats, third is fish. So we have our bases covered, so it's important because everyone has pets and everyone is interested in supporting their pets and there are those that love reptiles or birds. There can be a lot of other things that can fit into that. This program will primarily focus on cats and dogs. At WT, we have a pretty strong pre-veterinary program. We're nestled between two veterinary schools. So there are so many students that are going to come from a wider and wider radius to WT because of the reputation of our pre-veterinary program. The challenge with the pre-veterinary curriculum is that it's hard. About 70% of the students that come in as a freshman pre-vet will not go on to being accepted into veterinary school, to applying to veterinary school.

There are a number of different things that, hurdle wise, are going to prevent them from ending up in the veterinary route. But my passion for this program is that you can love animals and you can still find a job in the companion animal industry because of what I said. It's a multi-billion dollar industry. So part of my goal with this program is not just to educate about cats and dogs and other pets, but also to help those that are in this program that are pursuing a certificate or a minor to understand what are the other opportunities out there career-wise? What does that look like? How can I still be involved in companion animals if I realize vet school is not for me?

Myka Bailey:

So would you say there's any stereotypes or misconceptions that come along with companion animals?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I think one of the biggest ones is if I love animals, then I don't have to love people. Whether it's vet school or something else, what I typically say is animals usually don't come to us by themselves. Now granted, stray and unwanted surrendered animals, those are just the animals. So there are those opportunities, but in general, I think you have to work with the human, that is because of the human animal bond bonded to the animal.

Myka Bailey:

That makes sense. So whenever you're working on the animal, you also have to make sure that you're taking care of the person who owns it as well. Is that what you're saying?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

That's right. And I mean, if you think about it, you want to go into companion animal nutrition or you want to go into grooming, or you want to go and start a doggy daycare in a boarding facility. In each of those career paths, you get to work with animals and that's really awesome. And you are also still going to have to work with people, which means you got to work on your people skills.

Myka Bailey:

Yeah. I guess so for the vet side, I never really thought about that because it was just like, get the animal well. But I can see in grooming, it's not really about what the dog wants. The dog can't tell you how they want their hair cut, but the person is going to be like, okay, this is how I want it.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

That's exactly right. We were talking the other day in class because we were talking about feline nutrition and I said, so Meow Mix, regular cat food, how many colors does Meow Mix have? Probably three or four colors in the kibble. Do the cats care what color the kibble is? No. Why is it colored? Because people care. They want to say, I'm giving my cat something that has a variety, that looks different. Even something as simple as that.

Thomas Rodriguez:

That's something I haven't even thought about. I'm just like, we just give the cats the same food every ... I mean, we don't give them Meow Mix, we just give them Purina. But we just give it to them. We don't really think about it. Every now and then they get wet food and stuff and they get real excited.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Exactly. It's true. It's true.

Thomas Rodriguez:

So you're a pet owner and you know a lot about this whole companion animal thing. What are some guidelines that people should follow when owning a companion animal?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I think one of the things that we talk about in class that I help to educate the students on that I am passionate about is that you can't flippantly go into getting an animal. It is a huge responsibility. You will do yourself well to do the research ahead of time to find out what you're getting into in regards to financially, what does that mean in regards to the lifespan of the animal? How long are we talking about? So you might see a cute little bird in the pet store, but what you don't realize is that that bird might live longer than you. It might live 30 or 40 years. Obviously that's not going to be the span of a human, but you get what I'm saying. This is not just a small little commitment. I think we know a whole lot more about cats and dogs.

I think the husbandry, how to care for them, the resources that are available, they are much more at our fingertips and we know a whole lot more about cats and dogs, but it is still pertinent to decide if I'm getting a specific breed, what's that dog's needs? How much exercise does it need? How active is it? Things like that because it can really impact the lifestyle. And what they have found in regards to shelters when they do research is that it is no longer about overpopulation in regards to not spaying and neutering being the problem as to why there are so many animals. More times than not now it is because someone hasn't had an opportunity or chosen to do the research to find out what are the needs of this animal before I get it. And then unrealistic expectations lead to someone saying, "I can't have this animal anymore." So I think that's hugely important. When we think about the exotic species, there is far less that is known with reptiles, with birds, with things like that.

A lot of times those animals end up getting relinquished because of some kind of medical problem that could be prevented with the right diet or with the right husbandry. They need specific lights, things like that. So again, knowledge is power, and it's important to think about it as a commitment to the animal, not just a commitment to yourselves.

Myka Bailey:

This is very true. I had a fish tank when I was probably 14, and I just got it, ooh, fun. Fish, that's what I want. And they all got this disease called ich and they died very quickly. And I was so confused, I was just putting more fish in whenever my other ones died and they would get ich and then die. Well, when I got fish recently, the person I bought them from was like, "You have to have a heater in your tank or else your fish are going to get ich." And I was like, "That's what I did wrong." I was just killing these fish because I had no idea.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

Yes, yes. We talk about that a lot in regards to the ... And I think that's a perfect example. Someone that is in a pet store or wherever you might purchase an animal that has the knowledge to be able to educate the people when they are taking this animal home. We talked recently, the Wild West Wildlife Rehab group came in to provide a class and they were talking about how so many times someone goes in and sees this cute little reptile in the pet store, but what they don't realize is that that reptile is going to grow to need a tank that is huge because it's not going to stay small and little. It's going to become a four-foot-long reptile, and there are specific needs for that. So, hugely important.

Thomas Rodriguez:

So moving away from pets a little bit. You're talking about your program and everything. For our current students, especially those in pre-vet education and animal studies, what advice would you give them?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

I'm excited for the coursework that is available starting this semester because I think that it has been exciting for students because everyone wants to take a biology class that's about cats and dogs. So the coursework is hugely important. I think one of the things that is also important to know as you pursue an undergrad degree, you're choosing a degree path, but it doesn't necessarily niche you into this is what you're going to do when you get out. So there is still a great opportunity to consider what experiences do I want to have that are going to help to fine tune what I'm looking to do when I get out. Myka, you talked about how broad your major is and how there are really great opportunities, and I think sometimes the world is your oyster is great potential and it can also be intimidating.

So you have to continue to look for those opportunities to try things out to realize that part of the resources in an undergrad education is going to be the connections that you make with other people that are going to speak into your life and to give you things to consider that weren't necessarily even on your radar before. Because those are going to be the things, it's such a multifactorial experience when you get an undergrad degree that is going to help put you in the place to have the right opportunities where the doors open when you get out, because it's not just A plus B equals C, and there's my job. There's more to it than that.

Thomas Rodriguez:

That's something that I noticed getting into digital communication and all that. I started out just my first class, I was like, okay, it's a pretty broad subject. And then I got into the nitty-gritty of it and I was like, wow, there's a lot that goes into a production. Just this year alone when we did our one session, which is this big video that we make every year, there's so many moving parts. You have five people on cameras, you have one person on audio, you have people in the booth doing stuff, and it's this massive thing and it's a lot of moving parts, and it kind of relates to what y'all are doing with the moving parts with your kind of work. So I think that it's pretty important for people to understand is that, yeah, it's

not just as simple as, oh, this is my stereotyping my mind of what this is going to be, so it should just be like that.

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

That's right. And that's the cool thing about education. As you get to know something, it gets broken down and you realize the complexity of it, which is the whole power of an undergrad education because you realize, oh, there's so much more to it. And there are a lot of different niches that I can peel back and figure out. But yeah, it is far more complex, which is awesome.

Thomas Rodriguez:

All right, Myka, you want to ask her the big question?

Myka Bailey:

I sure can. So what does WT mean to you?

Dr. Sara-Louise Newcomer:

WT means to me a community of people that care unlike anything I've ever seen elsewhere. I think we have a strong reputation of saying it's always about the people, but I'll make it short, but I have a unique situation. So in April, I will have lived here for three years, so I haven't been here for very long. And about nine months into when my husband and I had moved here, we were in a near fatal car accident. That spring semester when it happened, I was in the hospital for about six weeks and we had a community at WT and within the broader area, our church community that cared for us when we were practically strangers and they did everything for us. They brought us meals for weeks, they cleaned my house, they provided transportation, they sat with us in the hospital. They did absolutely everything.

If I hadn't been convinced prior to that, I was convinced afterwards. This is my place, this is where I want to be. I'm thankful for that. I continue to see the opportunities that students have, and I was thinking about how rich this environment is at WT because it is a small university for all practical purposes and yet it has the broad experiences of any other big university, so makes it pretty special.

Myka Bailey:

Thank you so much for listening, and thank you again to our guest, Dr. Newcomer and Willow Kate. We will see you next time. If you want to listen in on more, go to www.wtamu/podcasts. And always, Go Buffs.