

0:00:00.0 Katie Berlin: Welcome back to Central Line. We're on site here at AAHA Con 2023, the very first AAHA Con in San Diego, and it's the end of the last day, and she's been talking for two solid days, if not long, probably longer, but at least the last two solid days. Dr. Niccole Bruno, welcome back to Central Line. It's so good to have you.

0:00:25.2 Niccole Bruno: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. I hope my voice makes it, but forgive it for not if it doesn't.

0:00:30.0 Katie Berlin: Well, we'll keep the conversation brief this time and give your voice a break, but I'm just really excited to catch up with you because Blendvet, last time you were on with Genine, Dr. Genine Ervin-Smith, your COO, and the two of you were on at Conex City last year, and so much has happened with Blendvet since then. So I just wanted to get caught up and see what you wanted to share about where Blendvet is, what you need, what the AAHA community and the community that's listening and watching the Central Line needs to know and what they can do if they wanna get involved. You just had a pathway event yesterday and I wanna hear about that. So that's it. I wanna hear what you're up to.

0:01:09.3 Niccole Bruno: Oh, are you ready?

0:01:11.7 Katie Berlin: I'm ready. Yeah, we're ready.

0:01:12.9 Niccole Bruno: So this year has been a whirlwind. Since I saw you in Nashville last year, Blend has been able to do so much and it's a great thing for me right now. I just feel very fulfilled. One of the things to your point is our pathway development programs, which are so near and dear to me because they're just an event that bring so much joy to be able to do something that I wanted when I was 12 years old, to be able to see myself in vet med, but also have experiences. So to be able to partner with AAHA and be able to do our second event in another city and really engage with students that would've never had this opportunity just brought so much joy.

0:01:52.1 Niccole Bruno: And then just seeing my friends, my colleagues, even my younger sister be a part of this event and watching them just engage with students, it just... It's such... I love the vet community. Like we're always for each other, with each other and really willing to stand together and do really good work. And so that was the pathway event yesterday. We worked with a school that is 95% Latinx And it's called Logan Memorial Educational Campus and it's a school that starts at six weeks actually and goes...

0:02:25.9 Katie Berlin: Wow.

0:02:26.9 Katie Berlin: And their goal is eventually go to 12th grade, and right now they are at 10th grade, so every year they'll be adding a new class year. And the students were just... They just soaked everything up yesterday and they were asking us, are you coming back? Some of the younger students, we were outside in the rain. When does it rain in San Diego?

0:02:48.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah, it was San Diego and yesterday was totally bizarre.

0:02:54.5 Niccole Bruno: It was like I should have known because when they said, "Let's do it outside", I'm like, what if it rains because where I'm from, it can rain at any point. And they're like, "It never rains here." And that was the end of it.

0:03:03.6 Katie Berlin: Kicked up, yeah.

0:03:04.2 Nicole Bruno: Yeah. But we made it and the kids, they always remind you that some of the things we stress out about they could care less about. And so we were able to... Still the show went on. We had tents so we did our surgery station, emergency station, general practice, nutrition and shelter medicine and they rotated through all of those stations. But also because this school has a unique opportunity to get to younger students, we partnered with a couple of our colleagues to go into the classrooms and they were able to experience just more of a classroom type career day presentation. So in total, we touched 250 students yesterday.

0:03:48.1 Katie Berlin: Oh my God, that's amazing.

0:03:49.7 Nicole Bruno: Yeah, it was great.

0:03:51.0 Katie Berlin: And I've seen some of the video and photos on social media and it looks like they are just having a blast.

0:03:55.6 Nicole Bruno: They had fun.

0:04:00.6 Katie Berlin: I watched, yeah, with them all in their surgery caps, like their bouffant caps and...

0:04:03.3 Nicole Bruno: Some of them kept it on all day.

0:04:05.3 Katie Berlin: I love that.

0:04:06.1 Nicole Bruno: They went through surgery and I was like, "Guys, you could take it off." Technically you shouldn't be doing CPR with your surgical cap and gown, you're not sterile. They're like, "No, it's cool. We're gonna keep it on." And I'm like, "You know what? If that's... " And sometimes in vet med, we wear caps and gowns and we're doing CPR.

0:04:21.6 Katie Berlin: You never know.

0:04:23.3 Nicole Bruno: You never know. But the other part that made us all laugh at the end is we do a closing ceremony and we give them a certificate for participating in the day. And as they were coming up, they looked so tired from the day and I said, "Are you tired?" And they're like, "Yes, so tired." I'm like, "Welcome to vet med. We're tired too."

0:04:43.9 Katie Berlin: That's good.

0:04:46.0 Nicole Bruno: So yeah, we're training them in all capacities.

0:04:49.8 Katie Berlin: I think that's fantastic. And they should know it's tiring, but you're tired at the end of the day having done good work and that seems like they really understood that and felt it.

0:04:57.6 Nicole Bruno: They did, they did.

0:04:57.7 Katie Berlin: And you had a really dynamite crew working with you of volunteers yesterday.

0:05:03.3 Nicole Bruno: The best people, like people that I've fortunately partnered with in the past. So they kind of know the expectations and bring that energy too to kind of ignite the students because students can be shy. That age group is sometimes feeding off of each other's vibes and... But they... Once you get past that and they get engaged with what we're trying to show them, their personalities come out. And I got many hugs yesterday. Just really they just show so much appreciation. And I think what I love working with students the most is that they remind you of why you wanted to be a vet. And so often, we have really bad days in vet med where we question why we're still in this profession, but when you see and talk to a student that thinks what you're doing is amazing, it changes your perspective just like that. And so I think that these are just unique opportunities to remind us even at a conference, or even if we're doing it just on another day, like, I always get re-energized when I work with students of all ages. Even vet students when I go to vet schools and talk to them, they remind me of why I'm in it.

0:06:12.0 Katie Berlin: Yeah. And I totally see that in the faces in the pictures that I saw. Like the volunteers are just glowing. So just because I don't wanna forget to ask, but like somebody who's listening or watching and they're like, I wanna do that. Like I wanna be a volunteer because you can just easily feel how much joy that brings everybody involved. What do they do?

0:06:34.1 Nicole Bruno: So for now, right now we have a couple of pathway projects that we're working on trying to kind of finalize. So usually the best way is to stay connected with us on LinkedIn or Instagram at [blend.vet](https://www.linkedin.com/company/blendvet) and on Instagram we're [blend.vet](https://www.instagram.com/blendvet) as well. So usually when we are going to do an event, we make a formal announcement, we ask for volunteers where QR codes are starting to be circulated so that you can sign up and that gives us a way to connect with you. Sometimes people do contact us just to say like, "Hey, whenever there is one, we wanna be the first to know." And so we usually remember those people. But I'm not gonna promise that as we get busier that I'm gonna remember everyone so I just say the best thing to do is keep watching us because once we send out that code, then we're starting the list of people that wanna be a part of our programs.

0:07:23.5 Nicole Bruno: But I also just wanna tell the community like why I would love for people to partner with us and do this? This is also something that you can also do on your own and that's why even having this presentation with Dr. Courtney Campbell earlier, we talked about just little things that we all can do to just give back to schools. We don't have to wait for this big event because the impact can be just showing up and reading a book to a kindergarten class or having career day at a school. But I remind everyone that sometimes the schools that are in need the most are not the schools that are necessarily in our neighborhood or in the neighborhoods of our hospitals. So to remember that, that there are students that are underrepresented in this profession, and that we... That's our opportunity to give back to those schools.

0:08:12.1 Katie Berlin: I love that. And shout out to Dr. Cherice Roth who has written two books that are spectacular examples of books that you could read to a class.

0:08:21.1 Nicole Bruno: Exactly, exactly. And we actually brought her book to our classroom presentations. We had little boxes and this is something that anybody can do. Just start a box of just maybe get like some of the models that you don't use in practice anymore and put that in there. The

kids were so mesmerized by the skulls that we had or just some of these older models.

0:08:43.4 Katie Berlin: One of the hearts with the heartworms in it.

0:08:43.6 Nicole Bruno: Exactly. And you just put that and you create like a little box and then that way when you think you have time for a career day, then it's just all packed up. But it's also something that you can keep in your lobby so that when students come for your appointments, they can pick it up and explore. But for me, these events are always just so impactful because we're able to really spend that one-on-one time with the students and that sometimes can get lost if you're just doing a classroom presentation with like 30, 40 students. But I think whatever we do is take a step and that's a step in a positive direction.

0:09:21.5 Katie Berlin: Do you think that you'll ever do these events sort of franchise them?

0:09:28.1 Nicole Bruno: I would love that.

0:09:29.3 Katie Berlin: So like a group that where you're not involved. You don't have to be there, but somebody else spearheads that effort so that you can sort of multiply them?

0:09:34.7 Nicole Bruno: That would actually be one of the visions that I would love to have because even yesterday, the school asked like, "Can you come back? When can you do this?" And while I would love to, there's so much involved with coordinating the faculty sometimes and flying to San Diego or anywhere else. And so my goal with my programs is always to try to find the local community to help support the event so that way the connections are with them. And I'm there, but not I don't need to be there for the next one. So yeah, even if San Diego wanted us to come back in December, that's not really realistic for me to be like, I'm coming back, but some of...

0:10:11.2 Katie Berlin: As nice as that would be.

0:10:12.2 Nicole Bruno: As nice as that would be but we had an opportunity to introduce them to some veterinarians that live in the San Diego area, that live in the LA area, that it's not as much of a burden for them to come back. And so our hope, my hope is once we start getting some of the photographs and everything that we can follow up with the school. One of the things we're doing next week is we're doing a parent program so that these parents can learn how to support their students in vet med. And to me, that's always important because your village is such a support system for you as you're navigating the different stages getting into vet school. So we feel like the parents need to know like even in sixth grade, this is ways and opportunities that you can support your child. There might be programs that yes, you may have to drive 45 minutes to, but that's a way to keep your student engaged so that they stay in the pathway. So having those at local support means that yes, we could franchise it. They don't need me. They can still do the actual pathway event. So that's my hope.

0:11:11.9 Katie Berlin: Love it. This AAHA podcast is brought to you by CareCredit. CareCredit understands that all veterinary teams are busier than ever. To help patients get the care they need, the CareCredit Health and Pet Care credit card allows clients to access a budget-friendly financing experience anytime from anywhere on their own smart device. They can learn, see if they pre-qualify, apply, and even pay if approved all on that smart device. With just a tap, they have a friendly contactless way to pay over time for the services and treatments their pet needs, whether

it'd be a general referring or specialty hospital, as long as they accept the CareCredit credit card. So far, what you've dreamed has just exploded. So I really hope that continues to happen and that we see these popping up all over the place with your kind of like army of people who are out there just making stuff happen because you definitely have that power. Like talking to you makes me feel like we can get stuff done, you know what I mean?

0:12:17.0 Nicole Bruno: Well, thank you.

0:12:17.1 Katie Berlin: So you've got that.

0:12:18.0 Nicole Bruno: I wish my children felt the same way. We can get stuff done. Can we clean our...

0:12:21.9 Katie Berlin: It's never like that at home. Like it's never like that at home.

0:12:24.5 Nicole Bruno: I have no power at home.

0:12:25.7 Katie Berlin: Yeah. I remember giving piano lessons to the kid next door because her mom couldn't get her to practice.

0:12:30.8 Nicole Bruno: Of course not.

0:12:31.6 Katie Berlin: And I just sat there. I didn't have to do anything but she would practice in front of me for \$2 an hour. It's my first job.

0:12:38.5 Nicole Bruno: Well, look at you being an entrepreneur at such a young age.

0:12:42.1 Katie Berlin: But it's always like that at home but out here in the veterinary community, you are seen and what you're doing is having such big impact and just inspiring other people to say... Like even me, I know I've been in conversations where it would've been very easy to not be the one to speak up and say, no, I'm not sure that that's the way we need to do that thing. And because of you and a lot of the people that you talk to and with and work with on Blendvet, it is because of you that I've gotten braver about saying things in rooms where I am privileged enough to be, and others who can't speak up for themselves are not there yet. And that is a true gift and I...

0:13:22.6 Nicole Bruno: Thank you so much for saying that. I mean, it definitely... The vulnerability to do that, and even to speak on that topic is challenging at times but I think that for myself, I know that that's the first step, is being vulnerable and even just saying like, I don't have all the answers. I feel like sometimes I'm like...

0:13:43.1 Katie Berlin: Right. People expect you to like solve the problems.

0:13:49.0 Nicole Bruno: Yeah. Well, I'm always like I don't have every answer but the thing is is that I also know that we're gonna make mistakes. And I'm very grateful for the team that I have that I've worked with. I've never imagined this time last year where we would be this year and I credit so much to Blend to those people that are on my team because they're just as passionate about this work and we feed off of each other and I just love them so much and I'm grateful for them everyday. But yeah, we're doing so much other things within the land of just educational training

and it's been very rewarding to see an idea, a concept that I almost didn't pursue.

0:14:32.7 Nicole Bruno: And I think sometimes when I think back on just that decision that made me say, all right, let me give it a go, I'm very humbled and sometimes emotional because there's times where you get that no or you doubt yourself and self-doubt is so real. And there were times that I probably wouldn't have pursued it, but the no happened and I said, well, I'm gonna then do Blend and then you pause because you're like, it's hard and then the no happens again and you're like, well, then this is my calling. And it just kept going and... But again, there's been so many people that have helped when I had those moments of self-doubt to just keep pushing or just saying, let's do it together. And so if you wanna go far, go... What is that saying? Like if you wanna go far, go alone, but if you wanna go... I'm gonna mess it up. If you wanna go fast, best go alone.

0:15:21.1 Katie Berlin: If you wanna go fast, go alone, but if you wanna go far, go together. Yeah.

0:15:22.5 Katie Berlin: But if you wanna go far, go together and that's the thing. Like you can't really go fast in this space and that's the one thing that as an impatient person...

0:15:30.8 Katie Berlin: Oh, same, same, same.

0:15:30.9 Nicole Bruno: Oh man, that was very humbling, but the further part requires the people and that's why we are where we are today.

0:15:39.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah The village as Dr. Parenci calls it.

0:15:43.1 Nicole Bruno: Correct.

0:15:43.5 Katie Berlin: And you have a heck of a village.

0:15:46.9 Nicole Bruno: I do. I'm grateful.

0:15:48.4 Katie Berlin: Well, Dr. Nicole Bruno, thank you so much for coming by again...

0:15:51.6 Nicole Bruno: Thank you.

0:15:51.7 Katie Berlin: At the end of this very long couple of days.

0:15:52.1 Nicole Bruno: It's nothing. You know I love seeing you and talking to you.

0:15:53.9 Katie Berlin: Same. Always, always a pleasure. And we are really excited to see what you do next.

0:16:03.1 Nicole Bruno: Stay tuned.

0:16:03.8 Katie Berlin: We'll be there to help.

0:16:05.0 Nicole Bruno: Thank you.

0:16:05.1 Katie Berlin: Thanks to all of you for watching and listening. We'll catch you next time

on Central Line.

0:16:08.0 Nicole Bruno: Thanks. Bye.