



When Life Hands You Lemons, Build a Veterinary Clinic

Veterinarians find their passion for animals in a variety of ways. But for some veterinarians, passion finds them. Stephanie Smalls, DVM and owner of Loving Touch Animal Clinic in Newark, Delaware, is one such veterinarian. She grew up with animals, but not in the way you might expect.

“I’ve always had pets. My brother would bring them home, then I’d take care of them,” said Smalls. “It started out with a toy poodle from down the street, then there was an iguana, guinea pigs, rabbits, turtles and cats.” Smalls casually took care of animals until she went to college at Philadelphia University and got a job as a kennel worker for a hospital in the area. It became clear to Smalls that veterinary school would be her next step to advance her passion for animals.

After completing her veterinary degree at Tuskegee University in Alabama, Smalls worked for a couple of national veterinary hospitals, learning the ropes in fast-paced environments. Though generally happy with her work, she started to sense that her true passion lay outside of corporate medicine.

“In 2012, I realized I wanted my own clinic. I had a life-changing event take place that changed my whole perspective on my career and my life,” said Smalls. The life-changing event? Cancer.

“I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in my mediastinum. It was a scary time, I went through a lot of treatments, and the experience really shaped my passion and drive,” said Smalls. It was during this time she developed her personal motto – never give up – which she credits with helping her stay motivated. >>





Taking a leap

By 2014, Smalls departed from the corporate world and took a job as a public health veterinarian for the federal government. “I needed to find a way to maintain a full-time job so I could start working on my own clinic without a conflict of interest,” said Smalls. When she wasn’t working for the government, she was seeing patients in her home.

“I remodeled my living room to be a clinic for preventative care and saw patients in the morning before work and every weekend,” said Smalls. This helped Smalls build a strong client base and develop a referral network in the community and make a solid plan for building her clinic.

“I knew it wouldn’t be an easy process, because if it were, everyone would do it. Whenever I ran into a hurdle I kept saying to myself, ‘Never give up.’ Whenever someone said no, I found a way,” said Smalls.

Network of support

It is no easy undertaking to open a new clinic, and Smalls learned early on that having a network of people to support her throughout the process would be vital to her success.

“I used an SBA loan to finance my clinic. A good friend, who had used one to open



a clinic in Tennessee, put me in touch with his contact and helped walk me through the process,” said Smalls. From there, she searched for and found the perfect location in Newark – a two-story house on the corner of a high-traffic intersection.

“It was important to make my clinic feel like home, because I always want my patients and clients to feel comfortable and welcome,” said Smalls. The building was not originally zoned for a veterinary clinic, so Smalls sought advice from a client who was a city council member. “He helped me navigate the zoning process and came to meet with the county with me,” she said.

Just when she thought she’d cleared all the hurdles, the SBA loan posed one more requirement: bigger life insurance and disability insurance policies. This time, it was the support of her family that came through in a big way. “Because of my history with cancer, I had to have bigger policies. I wasn’t having any luck finding anyone to work with me. My uncle and dad called countless companies, pleading with them to insure me, and they finally helped me find the coverage I needed,” said Smalls.

After she met the stringent requirements of the SBA loan and closed on the property, Smalls had one more challenge to address: the workflow of the clinic. And her Patterson team came through with a workflow as unique as the clinic itself. >>





One-of-a-kind experience

"I bought a building that was built in the 1950s and had a couple additions added on over the years," said Smalls. Using a three-pronged office design-equipment-service approach, the Patterson team and contractor worked to creatively optimize the space.

"We had to be particularly clever about a couple of things. The first was plumbing, because the original part of the house had a basement, but the additions did not, so piping water throughout the clinic was one challenge. The second was figuring out what equipment would work best in the unique floorplan," said Matt Fletcher, Equipment Specialist.

Cabinetry presented another opportunity for creativity. "Doctor Smalls chose a combination of ILS Medical Grade cabinetry in her highest traffic, wettest areas of the clinic, and the ILS Hybrid E-Series cabinetry in areas less prone to moisture and damage," said Fletcher. This unique mix-and-match approach helped Smalls keep costs down and get the best quality cabinets for her needs throughout the clinic.

"Matt and Chris [Webster, Territory Manager] were so supportive and helpful to me through the entire process," said Smalls. "I was working on a lot of things at once, so I often looked to them to make recommendations, and they did. And I've been very happy with what I have."

A hopeful future

Sometimes it takes a life-changing event to illuminate paths in life that had not originally been visible. For Smalls, being diagnosed with cancer rerouted her path toward clinic ownership and made her more determined than ever to achieve her goals. She took her own advice and never gave up, overcoming challenge after challenge to bring her vision of owning a successful and fulfilling clinic to life.

The doors of Loving Touch have been open for a year, and business has been booming for Smalls and her staff. She plans to bring on another veterinarian soon if the clinic keeps growing as quickly as it has been, and has big plans for the future. “A long-term goal is to have more than one clinic. I’m not sure where I would want the next one to be, but I’m already thinking about what’s next,” said Smalls.

In the meantime, Smalls is loving her new career as clinic owner. “This experience has been amazing. Sometimes I think about how one day it started with this thought, ‘I wonder if I could do this,’ and it amazes me every day that I did,” she said. “I had a tremendous amount of support and expertise to help me through the process, and that helped me be successful.” PT

For more information about Loving Touch Animal Clinic, visit lovingtouchclinic.com.



From left to right: Matt Fletcher, Dr. Stephanie Smalls and Chris Webster

PATTERSON TEAM

Jon Butz, *Branch Manager*

Chris Webster, *Territory Manager*

Matt Fletcher, *Equipment Specialist*

Paul Warshefski, *Service Technician*

Don Walter, *Service Technician*

Jerrand Pinder, *Service Technician*

Ray Reynante, *Service Technician*

Michael Reynolds, *Office Designer*

