

0:00:04.1 Katie Berlin: Hi.

0:00:07.4 Margot Vahrenwald: Hi. It's so good to meet you, Kate.

0:00:08.1 Katie Berlin: It's great to meet you Dr. Margot Vahrenwald. Welcome to our little makeshift central line studio here, but when I say makeshift, it's actually much classier than my central line studio in my house. So it's kind of nice. We have a little studio here at Connexity, and it's really great of you to stop by, I'm very excited to meet you and chat.

0:00:28.7 Margot Vahrenwald: Oh, good. I'm thrilled to be here. This is just a fun experience. You had asked earlier where I was from, I actually grew up all over, but currently live in Denver and own a practice, a small animal practice in the northeast part of Denver, in a neighborhood called Park Hill.

0:00:48.3 Katie Berlin: Yeah, I don't know Denver very well yet. I just moved there. But it's very exciting to be getting to know it and maybe I'll get to stop in and see your hospital. I actually checked to see if you could be my vet and you're a little too far. I live in Thornton.

[overlapping conversation]

0:01:07.2 Katie Berlin: But I do realize I really miss dogs. I'm not in practice right now, and I really miss just rolling around the floor with other people's dogs, you know? That sounds crazy, but I really miss it. So I'm having a little bit of withdrawal, so I may have to come visit you. [chuckle]

0:01:20.6 Margot Vahrenwald: You can come any time. I get that way, we don't have any cats right now, we do have dogs, but yeah, sometimes get really excited to see some of my favorite feline patients coming in because I get to snuggle.

0:01:31.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah. People don't realize that how much as vets we... And vet techs and anybody who gets to touch animals at vet clinics, I think, we just kind of crave that even if we have animals at home, we just get used to having that constant physical touch with animals, and now that I have my own two pets and you don't really get to see anybody else's, it makes me sad. I really do miss it. So the clients, if you're listening, we do miss your pets.

0:01:57.9 Margot Vahrenwald: They have... All of them are so individual and have such wonderful personalities, even the ones that wanna kill us.

0:02:03.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah, exactly, and I have one of those. I have a Chihuahua who is usually snoring on this podcast, he's not invited to Nashville, but he's definitely very good at being at Chihuahua.

0:02:14.3 Margot Vahrenwald: I'm glad to be with another veterinary... And we have a little Chihuahua Terrier and a little Schnoodle. And neither will let me brush their teeth, so the struggle is real.

0:02:24.6 Katie Berlin: Yeah, it's the nails that get me. There are many drugs involved, so the nails... But I thought you were gonna say that you were glad that I was too far away for you to be my vet. [laughter] He's a little bit tricky.

0:02:35.3 Margot Vahrenwald: I like to try and win them over even when they don't want me to touch them ever.

0:02:41.1 Katie Berlin: Yeah, yeah. He's kind of a cat dog, they tend to be, so... Anyway. Well, so part of the reason that you're here is because you are about to start your tenure as AAHA President.

0:02:52.5 Margot Vahrenwald: Yes, very much...

0:02:52.7 Katie Berlin: Which is very exciting. Congratulations.

0:02:55.9 Margot Vahrenwald: It's really exciting, and I'm really honored to do it, and I'm excited to do it, I'm nervous to do it as well, but it really is... AAHA has been part of the fabric of my veterinary career since I transitioned, I literally walked up the street to a practice in the Washington DC area called Friendship Hospital for animals who is a long, long, tenured AAHA-accredited practice and went in and said I'm interested in learning more about veterinary medicine and thinking I might wanna go to that school, but I want to be in this environment, handed the practice administrator at the time my resume. And she said, "When can you start?" And I said, "What will I be doing?" She said, "Are you okay with being a receptionist?" I'm like, "Fine." Started the next day, and I worked there for not quite...

0:03:42.6 Katie Berlin: Wow! That's like everyone's dream right now, everyone listening is like, "Where is this person gonna walk into my clinic and be like, "I wanna start as reception tomorrow."?"

0:03:49.7 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah. They're few and far between at least right now. But that was a great experience. And the owner at the time, Dr. Peter Glassman was a great mentor enough that I did go take all the science classes that you don't take when you're a Journalism major at the University of Georgia, Go Dawgs. And then the other privilege that I had is that Friendship had a private practice internship, and so I went back as an intern and then stayed as a staff doctor for a few years before moving back west.

0:04:24.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah, it's really funny 'cause I'm from the DC area too, and I know Friendship, I never worked there, but it did occur to me at some point to apply there, but I just ended up going to different geographic areas and never ended up there, but I can definitely relate to walking in and being like, "Hi, I'd like a job," because I did that as well a couple of times, and I just... I think it's pretty neat that you have a background that wasn't originally in vet med, so you were a communication...

0:04:54.3 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah, my undergraduate degree is in Journalism and my master's degree is in Communications and seemingly they would have nothing to do, but when I was a child, people would say, "What do you wanna be when you grow up?" I'm like, "I wanna be a writer," or, "I wanna be a veterinarian."

0:05:07.2 Katie Berlin: Same.

[laughter]

0:05:09.8 Katie Berlin: Except for a brief astronaut period, but that got quickly discouraged.

0:05:12.9 Margot Vahrenwald: I think everybody has that one.

0:05:13.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah.

0:05:15.4 Margot Vahrenwald: And so I really honestly use every single skill that I learned in my former career in my current career, and it makes a huge difference 'cause it helps me communicate with clients, helps me in this position because I can talk, but it also is really amazing to try and work and teach my team about words, the power that our words have, and that's a little bit of just why I'm excited to be able to serve AAHA as the president, this coming year because this is such a marvelous association that has given me so much back in the old days of when there were student AAHA chapters, then in the free membership when I first graduated, which we still do, to now being in a position where I've opened a practice, I've built it intentionally to be accredited, and I like that process that they challenge us to continually improve, they're giving us the tools to continually improve, and then I still have somebody come and peek under the hood and make sure that we're going in the right direction, giving me... "Hey, I was just at this practice and they're doing this and it's so awesome, it would work really well with your team," and trying an experiment with that information, lots of life hacks there too.

0:06:36.5 Katie Berlin: Yeah, that's funny 'cause Dr. Adam Hechko was just talking to me a little while ago, who is our outgoing President, and he used the word experiment too, he was talking about how he... That's how he sort of introduces change to his team, the idea of change is the idea that everybody's sort of trying things to get better together, and if they don't work out, we can examine why, and if they do, we can examine why and use that for the next experiment.

0:07:02.9 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah.

0:07:03.4 Katie Berlin: And I love that idea. Why does change have to be so scary and so permanent?

0:07:09.5 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah, I think maybe it's partly the personalities who are attracted to our industry, and I'm generalizing here, not pointing anybody out specifically, but we wanna be perfect and we get really Type...

0:07:22.1 Katie Berlin: I don't know who you're calling about.

[laughter]

0:07:22.1 Margot Vahrenwald: You're not Type A.

[laughter]

0:07:25.9 Katie Berlin: Never.

0:07:25.9 Margot Vahrenwald: But we wanna be so perfect, and for me coming out of school, as someone who had worked in a different arena and already had... When you work in PR and you're doing campaigns, 'cause I was in small PR agencies, you take ideas and you float them and

sometimes the client likes them, and then you invest in it and then it fails, and then the client is looking at you asking why they made that decision, how did you twist their decision into doing that? But you take away a learning process, this didn't work because X, Y, Z, and I think that's very true, inside our practices we have to take as much care of them and our teams as much as we're taking care of clients and patients, but we've got to help our teams understand it's okay to experiment, it's okay if the experiment doesn't work, that's still a success in that we got new information. And then we go on.

0:08:23.9 Katie Berlin: Yeah, absolutely. The theme for Connexity this year is creating a better world, and I love that theme because I feel like the energy here feels like all of the people here want to do that anyway, they don't need a conference to tell them to go out and create a better world, but we all need a little bit of help with the how sometimes, and I was just wondering, and everybody else has a vision that's different of what that better world looks like, so what does a better world in veterinary medicine look like to you?

0:08:53.8 Margot Vahrenwald: I think a better world in veterinary medicine, to me, is one where people are happy to be in the profession, to be in the industry, it is. I love my job, I love my practice. Good days, bad days. Yes, occasionally there's really bad days where you don't wanna go in the building, but 99% of the time, I'm always happy to go. I don't mind the challenges, you deal with the hard things and are resilient, and that's what I want people to see and not feel like we're doing it, and that's... Again, some of that is our cultures within our practice walls, but the other part is trying to teach our clients what we do and have value, the people delivering it have value, what we deliver has a huge value and to appreciate that rather than be, "Well, I blame everything for the past couple of years on COVID so the post-COVID crazies. It's all COVID's fault."

0:09:53.2 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Or at least COVID made it worse.

0:09:57.8 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah. But if we're... That's one part of creating a better world is creating a better work environment, and I will be honest and say, when I first opened my practice, you think you know everything, and then you get slapped in the face, you make assumptions that weren't valid, but I'm creating a better place in my community, hopefully I'm also making a commitment, and that's part of being on AAHA to very much try and continue to have the association serve its members and not just the veterinarian members but the entire veterinary team, so that we can all... Everybody can be proud if they work in the industry.

0:10:40.5 Katie Berlin: That made me so happy what you just said, because I really feel like... One of the ways that I have seen AAHA change just from the time when I was a member last year to a year later almost working here, and just hearing the conversations that are happening inside AAHA and hearing what the board talked about at their meeting, there's so much more emphasis on the team as a whole and not just veterinarians or managers. And I love that so much because one thing I can say, you said you started a practice, you feel like you know everything and then you quickly get taught otherwise, and it's the same thing as an associate that you go in and you're like, "Okay, I'm gonna be this way and I'm gonna act this way, and I'm never gonna lose my patients with this, or treat these people this way," and I quickly got slapped in the face too and got called into the principal's office a few times, and didn't realize that a lot of the impatience and everything that I was feeling with the team was actually because of anxiety that I had about my job and about what was gonna come walking through the door, and I just...

0:11:49.3 Katie Berlin: I think I didn't receive a lot of the support that I needed in my early career in a way that I could receive it that would allow me to then develop those relationships with the team early on, but later on I started to realize exactly how much that amazing vet experience for our clients or for the rest of the team depends on that dynamic.

0:12:11.5 Margot Vahrenwald: It's a journey.

0:12:12.6 Katie Berlin: That mutual respect.

0:12:14.5 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah, it's mutual respect and it's a journey. With my clients I always say, particularly if I'm meeting somebody the first time, I don't know them very well, is, "I'm here to be an advocate for your pet, but part of that is also to be in partnership with you to help you know what your options are, and then be able to help educate you and get you to what's reasonable and feasible for you to do but we still get the answers that we might need to help take care of your pet." And I really love what we're doing, and we've been working on it for a long time. Garth has an amazing brain, and it's really guiding some really great things from little tiny kernels of ideas to now things that we are rolling out or we'll be rolling out over the next year or the coming year after that.

0:13:04.9 Katie Berlin: This is Garth Jordan, our jeans-wearing CEO.

0:13:07.4 Margot Vahrenwald: Yes.

[laughter]

0:13:08.7 Margot Vahrenwald: But they are all things that are part of evolving the association to better serve its members so that we are better able to go out and serve our communities through our practices, through whatever we do in the industry, and it's just... It's really, really inspiring, and I'm glad to have had a small role in contributing to that in our discussions and watching what we're doing, there's some amazing creative people that are part of the AAHA staff and others that we bring in in partnership that just have so much care about everybody in this industry, particularly with all of the things that we've looked at in terms of culture and mental health and wellness and all of that, to try and balance that, we have to balance all that mental health and well-being and things that create our culture, but we still have a job to do, which is to take care of people and their pets.

0:14:08.4 Katie Berlin: Yeah, absolutely. I feel like I used to have as an outsider or an AAHA member, I was and was not for my career, I had chunks of AAHA membership and then chunks where I wasn't, and I felt like AAHA had a job which was to tell you how to practice really good medicine, you know? Standards to help you accredit your hospital and guidelines to give you latest recommendations from a task force and that was it. And you didn't hear a lot from AAHA about culture and well-being and keeping people happy so that they could do their job sustainably using this good medicine, and that conversation is so exciting to me because it takes just as much of that as it does knowing what the latest drug is to treat high blood pressure, you need that wellness and sustainability to practice excellent medicine just as much, and I love how forward thinking the board is and our leadership is right now, and I really... That's what I want people to know about AAHA, is that people like you and Garth are really leading the way and pushing forward in that arena as well as the clinical medicine that AAHA has been known for for so long.

0:15:24.4 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah. Well, it's all interconnected. You can't deliver great medicine if your team is not functioning properly.

0:15:31.9 Katie Berlin: Exactly. If you're bleeding people.

0:15:33.0 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah, and obviously with all of the things that are facing us as challenges in the industry, staffing is a huge one. Well, an accredited practice that is always continually improving is going to draw great people to work there. I love my team, the team members that I've met from many members and friends, my fellow board members, they're fantastic people, so we just need to celebrate that and it just gives us... I think all of us on this current board and even anybody who keeps coming in and joining us is, we want everybody to love our industry, but part of that love of our industry right now is taking care of it, and in terms of that, we're caretaking AAHA which has a long history. I was looking up just so I would know the facts, the original gentleman who did it were doing it at a time when the most focused on animals as the transportation or the way of work, farming or other things where animals are used for transport or grains and suddenly there were these gentlemen who were sort of saying people's attitudes about cats and dogs are changing from they just get the slop to bringing them into their homes, we need better care for those small animals, and from that, they also wanted to make sure that that [0:16:53.1] _____, it was very patriarchal at that point.

0:16:56.0 Margot Vahrenwald: We're focusing on how best to create a business model that would deliver that care to small animals, and it's continued to evolve, and I think the things that are coming, the new pain management guidelines, the canine vaccination guidelines, everything that's coming out or just released this year, and everything that is coming in 2023 and 2024 is gonna be amazing, and it's not just gonna be a document of guidelines, there's all of this focus on how do we take these guidelines and standards and make them what we do every day?

0:17:34.2 Katie Berlin: Exactly, yeah, how do we interpret them for our practices and our people and our clients? Because everybody is a little bit different and one set of standards and recommendations isn't gonna fit all in every formula, and I totally love that too, about the content we're making out, and I love that you love it. Because without the board support, you guys are the boots on the ground and really seeing it out there at work too.

0:18:04.4 Margot Vahrenwald: Well, I'm a practicing doctor, I'm a practice owner, I need to train my staff, I need to... Things like that, but I don't necessarily... It's a personal interest that I do create some stuff from the ground up, but it's nice to have a reference and a resource where I can say, "Hey, I can use this." I can literally take a tool kit, open it and there's a team meeting about it, there's message points for it, there's tailored things that are tailored towards the front desk, there's things that are tailored to what we call our outpatient team, and there's things that are obviously very tailored to the inpatient team, and they all meld together. And also usually within that too is the business part of it too, is how do we use this to make our practice profitable, because that means we can do all the things that I wanna do for our teams.

0:19:00.1 Katie Berlin: Yep, yeah, making money is not a bad thing.

0:19:02.9 Margot Vahrenwald: No, no, we have to and that's where the value is. And then there are other things that are just... I hope everybody really will enjoy the benchmarking application that's coming out. Every member will have access to that, and then you can add tiers to it, but just to

be able to look at what you're doing in your practice compared to other practices is not meant to make you feel bad, it's meant to maybe make you strive that hey, we can do better here.

0:19:32.3 Katie Berlin: Yeah. Yep. And that group sort of collective mindset of like, this is where the profession is going and I wanna go there too, versus I'm doing better than they are at this thing, that's come up a few times actually in these conversations that we're having here at Connexity, and I love that too, the idea of a collective moving forward, if we're doing better over here, how can we encourage the profession to do better overall? And I see AAHA playing a huge role in that too, not everybody is gonna be accredited, that's just the way it is, but the more hospitals are AAHA accredited or have access to the AAHA standards and can say, "We are interested in getting better and staying better and growing as a hospital," that brings the whole profession up.

0:20:17.5 Margot Vahrenwald: Yeah, and it just... You need tools to do that. We're doing that and we just... I don't know, there's so much that there are certain things I can't say about that.

[chuckle]

0:20:26.0 Margot Vahrenwald: There's really good stuff happening and all of it is member-focused, and I think that's... Having worked in a different profession in DC with other associations, that focus on our membership is so important, and I don't think AAHA ever lost sight of it, but I think there's a renewed energy about it, and every group has to refresh and do stuff, and we're really doing some neat stuff.

0:20:56.1 Katie Berlin: Absolutely. Dr. Margot Vahrenwald, thank you so much for stopping by. Very excited to see the gavel get passed to you, [chuckle] and congratulations on your just about to start presidency.

0:21:09.1 Margot Vahrenwald: Thank you.

0:21:10.0 Katie Berlin: Very excited to see what kinds of things happen in the next year with you at the helm.

0:21:15.6 Margot Vahrenwald: Well, I look forward to future conversations with you about the industry that we love.

0:21:18.7 Katie Berlin: Me too.

0:21:19.8 Margot Vahrenwald: Thank you.

0:21:20.0 Katie Berlin: Thanks.