



“I want to be a voice for animals; to represent and help them. They are so loyal and forgiving”

From a young age, Vicky Bannister had a bond with animals and knew she wanted to be a vet

WORDS ELLEN TOUT PHOTOGRAPHS LAURA RICHARDSON



RIGHT AND BELOW Vicky enjoys connecting with and caring for all her patients, including rescue dog Bella, who is having her weigh-in, and cute guinea pigs Nutty and Sassy



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THE WORKING DAY for a vet is a combination of consultations, surgeries and tending to emergencies. Vicky is proud to work at a practice

that champions animal welfare. She is also deeply proud of how hard she worked to make her childhood dream of being a vet a reality



Vicky Bannister has always been fascinated by animals. 'As a child, I would watch every animal programme on TV. We always had pets when I was growing up and I enjoyed horse riding,' she says. 'As I got older, my feelings changed from loving animals to wanting to help them and make a difference. I said I wanted to be a vet when I was five years old and that never changed.' Vicky remembers contacting universities at a young age. 'I would sit and read through prospectuses and research what I needed to do. I started visiting veterinary practices after school – I was committed to becoming a vet. I worked at kennels, catteries and riding schools and volunteered at the Cats Protection charity to gain experience.

'I wouldn't say I was a naturally gifted academic at school; I had to work hard and push myself. It became my absolute focus to get into university,' she says. Vicky studied at the Royal Veterinary College in London. 'I was ecstatic when I got an acceptance offer. It was like a dream come true. Over five years, I studied the theory and the

clinical side of things, such as farming, small animals, animal welfare, food production, wildlife and hospital work – there are so many strands and it is intense, but I feel very lucky.' Vicky qualified in 2010 and has since worked at two veterinary practices in Kent.

Healing juggling act

'I love how calming animals are,' she says, 'but they don't have a voice and are completely dependent on humans. I want to be their voice and represent them, as well as support people to realise when their animals need us to help them. I find animals so forgiving and loyal and they are always there for us. They're amazing. I feel privileged and honoured to do my job.'

As a vet, the working day can be long and unpredictable. 'My day will usually start with consulting in the morning and then a few operations and then more consultations – a mixture really – and also covering for other vets in emergencies,' she explains. 'You are always learning >>>



LEFT Getting her rescue cat Smokey to purr is relaxing!

RIGHT AND BELOW Crafting helps Vicky unwind, as does a quick HIIT session. She made bunting for her wedding, which she reuses on special occasions and, when her daughter, Isla, turned one, Vicky made a child's quilt from clothing Isla had outgrown



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"We love being out in nature, looking at the different colours of the seasons and not thinking about anything else"

ABOVE AND RIGHT Being a mum spurred Vicky to rethink her work-life balance. Time spent in the woods with her family is a precious and mindful Sunday activity for Vicky after a demanding week



and developing, and you have to be able to multitask. You can be dealing with a road traffic accident in one breath and then onto vaccinating a puppy in the next. It can be emotionally and physically draining at times.'

Self-care to care for others

Vicky enjoys getting to know her human clients too. 'I like speaking to people and learning about them. Connecting with pet owners is a huge part of the job, because that is the person who is enlisting their trust in you. They need to feel comfortable, put at ease and reassured,' she says. 'It's like when you drop off your child at school. Animals are people's children and beloved family members. I feel attached to a lot of the owners I see regularly, which is lovely because I've got a great relationship with them – but it can also be tough if the news is not good.'

Vicky admits she puts a lot of pressure on herself. 'Being a vet is harder than I ever imagined, but I think much of that can be self-driven and it is something I continue to work

on,' she says. 'I feel a responsibility to make sure I do my absolute best – to find out what's wrong, fix it and take good care of the animal. Not knowing what's wrong can be hard.'

How has she learned to manage stress? 'I don't think you can ever prepare yourself for the difficult aspects of the job. Sometimes I don't cope well but, over the years, I have learned strategies to help me rationalise things. I have a great support network – it helps to talk to my peers and other vets,' she says. 'I always put myself in the position of the owner but, equally, I try to tell myself that I do my best.'

To help her come to terms with the more painful parts of her job, Vicky sometimes talks to a counsellor. 'She helps me rationalise my thoughts and process my emotions. I'm interested in mental wellbeing and, often, unless you talk to somebody, things build up in your head. It's important to be aware of your mental health. Everybody can benefit from checking in and asking themselves how they are.'

Vicky practises mindfulness and enjoys doing Pilates and HIIT to switch off and take care of herself. 'Mindfulness is

something I tapped into a few years ago and I always go back to it if I have had a bad day. We all get so wrapped up in our busy lives but just observing a candle or listening to music can help bring me back to the present moment,' she says.

Teachers in life

'Since I had my daughter, Isla, nearly two years ago, I've become more mindful. I try to focus on enjoying the here and now; laughing and having fun together. Children and animals are amazing at being mindful. If you look at a dog chasing a ball, he is completely in the moment. All he is worried about is that ball and he's happy because he's not fretting about yesterday or tomorrow – he focuses on having a good time. My rescue cat, Smokey, is also great at helping me unwind; simply sitting and listening to her purr... It's important to me to instil care for nature and animals into Isla.'

Time spent outdoors is valuable to Vicky. 'On Sundays, my husband, Duncan, Isla and I usually go for a walk in the woods. We love being out in nature, looking at the different

colours of the seasons and not thinking about anything else. Nature is such a healer and so soothing.' She also enjoys crafts, cooking and time in the garden. 'I made a quilt for my daughter for her first birthday using her old clothes. I enjoy having a task to focus on and making something for someone I love is the ultimate feelgood activity for me.

I enjoy cooking from scratch and experimenting with flavours. Having a stressful job, eating well helps me look after myself. I want Isla to have a good relationship with food too. I appreciate the process of making things. 'Since having a child, it is important to me to look after the environment. I buy reusable nappies and wipes and try to do everything I can to be environmentally conscious. I want to teach Isla to look after the world we live in and to appreciate it,' she says. 'I am proud of being a vet and how hard I worked to get here. I'm also proud of being a mother and of the new perspective on life that Isla has given me.'

Vicky works at Sandhole Veterinary Centre, Snodland, Kent, ME6 5LG; sandholevets.co.uk; rvc.ac.uk