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Page: B

## Fort Worth team joined forces to put Boca the pug back together again

Surgeon answers nurse's call to treat a special patient -- for free  
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FORT WORTH -- Debra Drzich knew it was a shot in the dark. The worst that could happen, she figured, is Dr. Yadro **Ducic** would turn her down.

"He is probably going to think I'm nuts, but most everybody thinks I'm nuts anyway, so that is OK," Drzich reasoned.

Drzich, a cardiac nurse, approached the plastic surgeon in the hospital hallway and asked to speak with him privately.

Would he be willing to reconstruct the shattered jaw of an abused dog, a pug named Boca, and would he consider doing the surgery for free?

The doctor didn't laugh, a good sign.

"He said he had never worked on a dog but that he would be willing to give it a try," Drzich recalled. "He was up for the challenge."

That impromptu hallway conversation sparked a series of events that, two months later, brought a group of strangers together for an unprecedented surgery and a remarkable act of kindness.

"I don't think it matters whether it is a dog or a human or a cat,"

**Ducic** said. "You are going to feel empathetic because her jaw was so devastatingly broken in so many pieces. She couldn't close her mouth and she was drooling and she couldn't eat properly, couldn't bark, couldn't do much of anything. ... It's one of those things -- you don't do it for any reason other than you feel like you are supposed to."

### Overcoming adversity

It was August, and the little pug was in bad shape.

A good Samaritan had found her and called the hot line for Dallas Fort Worth Pug Rescue, a nonprofit organization that takes in abused, neglected and abandoned pugs. A volunteer went to get the pug and, upon seeing her, named her Boca, which means mouth in Spanish.

The volunteer drove Boca to the Westcreek Animal Clinic, where veterinarian Larry Gumfory treats the organization's rescued animals for about half the normal fee.

"She was with us for probably two months," Gumfory said. "She came in with her jaw hanging down, and she had been that way for a long time. There is no way of knowing for sure, but she probably got kicked in the mouth."

Despite her hardship, the staff at the clinic was struck by Boca's sweetness -- and her ability to overcome adversity.

Because she could not chew, she swallowed food whole, literally sucking it down.

"She was a champ at it," Gumfory said, chuckling. "There isn't a staff member here that doesn't just love her to death because she is such a sweet dog."

On two occasions, Gumfory operated on Boca's jaw, putting in pins in an attempt to close it. Both times, Boca broke the pins loose.

"It was pretty disheartening," Gumfory said. "I have done several broken mandibles in the past, and they have always healed. Probably part of the problem was that it was fractured on both sides of the mandible and not just one. It was real frustrating."

Eventually, Boca went to live with a foster mom, a volunteer with the pug rescue organization who would care for her until she could be adopted.

And then, in December, Drzich, also a volunteer with pug rescue, came into Boca's life.

"Her original foster mom was going out of town, so she asked me to watch her because she was going to be gone for two weeks," Drzich said.

Finding help

Shortly after Boca arrived at her home, Drzich was smitten.

"I had three dogs at the time, and everybody eats kibble out of a bowl," Drzich said. "She went over to the kibble bowl and just buried her face. It was a mess. There was kibble all over the floor."

Later that month, Drzich attended a Christmas party for the pug rescue organization. She said they were sitting around talking about how to help Boca when she thought of **Ducic**, whom she had assisted on two surgeries.

"No one was coming up with any solutions, and his name just kind of flashed across my brain. I thought to myself, 'I will talk to him. I will ask him,'" Drzich said. "It was one of those things. 'I wonder if he will

take a chance? I wonder if he will do it?"

Drzich said she came to admire **Ducic** several years ago when she saw him speak at a conference.

"He reconstructs people's faces, either after some kind of surgery or some kind of cancer of the face or neck, and he also reconstructs faces and necks of women who have been battered," she said. "To see his before-and-after pictures and to see the kind of work he does thoroughly impressed me."

Two weeks before Christmas, she saw **Ducic** in the hallway at Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital Fort Worth.

"She came up to me and said something to the effect of, 'You do a lot of reconstructive surgeries, and we have this really sweet little pug, and she was abused and she has all sorts of issues with her jaw. Do you think you might be able to look at her and fix it?'" **Ducic** recalled. "My first thoughts were, 'Gosh, I mean, operating on a dog? I wouldn't know the first thing about it, but I will try and help if I can.'"

**Ducic** gave Drzich all his contact information, and shortly afterward, Gumfory contacted him and sent over Boca's X-rays.

"Somebody took that cute little dog and kicked it in the head and broke its jaw," said **Ducic**, who doesn't have a dog. "The amount of pain that poor little thing has gone through is just incredible."

About a month later, Drzich asked **Ducic** about the screws and plates he would need to for Boca's surgery, which was going to take place at Westcreek Animal Clinic.

"He said he had already taken care of all that -- he had gotten it donated," Drzich said.

**Ducic** had contacted Kevin Jackson at Stryker, a medical equipment company.

"Donating time is one thing, but physically, you need instruments and plates and screws, and those things are crazy expensive," **Ducic** said. "We work a lot with a couple of plating companies, and the first one I called said, 'Of course, they would be happy to donate some instrumentation for this little dog.'"

'I was a little bit nervous'

Boca's surgery was scheduled for Feb. 13.

That morning, all the players arrived at Westcreek Medical Clinic, many meeting for the first time.

**Ducic** brought along a fellow doctor, Jared Inman; and two residents in training. Kevin Jackson with Stryker was also there also, along with Gumfory and his head technician, Dori Davis, who would be

administering Boca's anesthesia. Drzich, meanwhile, was prepared to assist in the operating room while her husband, John, captured it all on camera.

"I have to be honest. I don't get nervous for surgery, really ever, but I was a little bit nervous about this because I didn't know what to expect," **Ducic** said. "I didn't know what a pug's jawbone was going to feel like or how the screws were going to fit in there or what size screws we were going to need, things like that."

As it turned out, there was no need to worry. The 90-minute surgery went perfectly.

**Ducic** carefully and methodically reconstructed Boca's jaw -- a surgery that would have cost a human between \$25,000 and \$40,000.

"Somebody was looking out for this poor little thing and just kind of helped us along," **Ducic** said modestly. "We ended up doing the right thing. I think we all had a smile on our face. It felt good."

After the surgery Drzich took Boca home and nursed her back to health.

About a week ago, Gumfory took out her stitches, and, a few days later, Boca dropped by **Ducic's** Fort Worth office.

The doctor hadn't seen her since the surgery and was all smiles as he watched the little dog, fat and happy, waddle around his waiting room.

Boca can drink and eat normally now, Drzich told him.

And she barks again.

Drzich gave **Ducic** a hug.

"Thank you," she said, "for stepping outside the box."