

Tufts

VETERINARY MEDICINE

Small Daily Differences

Individual acts of kindness add up, within and beyond the Cummings community



PLUS: NEUROLOGY BEHIND THE SCENES ■ INTERVIEW WITH DR. SAWKAT ANWER

David, who once owned a pointer, quickly bonds with Fancy.



small daily differences

“We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to big differences that we often cannot foresee.” This statement by educator and reformer Marian Wright Edelman captures the multi-faceted spirit of outreach within the Cummings community. Small differences—often one person at a time—are being made every day. A new organization now taking shape at the Cummings School promises to bring a more united face to campus initiatives that, taken together, already add up to a huge difference.

BY LESLIE LIMON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELODY KO

FROM JUST OUTSIDE THE ROOM, one hears a soft murmur of delight as Fancy enters, accompanied by Pet Partner Deb Gibbs. The voice belongs to Harold, an elderly resident of Knollwood Nursing Home in Worcester, Massachusetts. Harold—dressed in a snazzy green shirt and clearly anticipating this visit—sits on the edge of his bed and reaches over to pat Fancy. “Man’s best friend,” he croons as he strokes the pointer’s head and reminisces about the mixed breeds he once owned. One of them, he says, followed the family to church one Sunday and sang along from outside as the organ began to play. It’s a story Harold loves to tell, notes Knoll-

wood Activities Director Joanne Dattis, who accompanies Gibbs and Fancy on their rounds.

Gibbs, a radiology teaching technician and supervisor at the Foster Hospital for Small Animals, is on the steering committee of Paws for People, a group of Cummings School and community members that coordinates animal-assisted activity and therapy. They work in conjunction with the Delta Society, a national organization promoting therapeutic connections between animals and people. Shrewsbury resident Harue Midtmoen started this local animal therapy program at the suggestion of Dr. Gary Patronek, then director of the Center for Animals and Public Policy. She ran it on her own for years until Cummings formed a steering committee and formalized it as Paws for People.

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As we make the rounds at Knollwood, we learn about some of the elderly residents we’ve met. Martha never used to respond to Fancy, but now she touches the dog, has begun to utter a few words, and even manages an occasional smile in its presence. Anna has been terrified of dogs all her life, but now allows Fancy to come into the room and sit quietly during Gibbs’s visit. In a later visit with Gibbs’s Shih Tzu puppy, Anna will muster the courage to hold it—a huge step. Even with some of the toughest challenges, the human-animal bond always seems to shine through.

PAWSING TO READ

Amanda Diurba, children’s librarian at the North Grafton branch public library, has seen that bond produce similar breakthroughs with a very different audience. In 2005 the library became a certified provider of the Delta Society’s Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) Program, which aims to boost reading self-confidence and ability in elementary schoolchildren. The North Grafton pro-

gram, one of the venues that Paws for People supports, has served almost 90 children from surrounding towns. Diurba, a devout animal lover and former teacher, says, “The children’s exuberance in reading and the degree of turnaround in their abilities is nothing short of miraculous; I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Once a week for six weeks, a handful of kids sit on comfy cushions on the floor in the library and read to their therapy dogs—or, in recent programs, to Ghost, a mellow therapy cat that adopted Sarah Perlmutter, V08, five years ago. The animals, calm and nonjudgmental, remain still and look reasonably attentive for 30 minutes. The animals’ partners sometimes coach the reading (“Ghost seems a little confused; can you explain that word?”) and now and then pull out a treat for young readers to offer to their listeners. The kids relax, focus on their reading, show the pictures to the animals, and have a ball.

At a recent session, Cummings veterinary technician Maggie Platt brings Cider, an enormous 3-1/2-year-old Greater Swiss

Mountain dog that plops down on the sofa waiting for her young friend to arrive. Canine comrades Percy, Callie, and Gracie all head for their spots. As they enter the room, the kids circulate among the animals to say hi. Then Perlmutter arrives, bundling Ghost against the bitter early-evening cold. She opens her coat and the kids flock around, chattering and petting “Ghostie,” who blinks and purrs. He, like every Delta-certified animal, has the temperament and training to take it all in stride: stroking, patting, childlike tail- or ear-pulling, and the presence of other animals, even those not certified by Delta.

Dr. Annette Rauch, V86, faculty advisor to Paws for People, explains the group’s mission, which starts with providing services to various populations in the community by matching certified pets and their partners with institutions such as nursing homes, hospitals, and homes for troubled youth. Another goal is to encourage students to conduct research in the field of animal therapy and document its benefits. This initiative also plants seeds that will bear fruit through-

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AT TUFTS

The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts supports creative, effective approaches to active citizenship across the university by granting Tisch Civic Engagement awards to students and two-year Tisch Faculty Fellowships.

“There are very few veterinarians involved in planning and preparedness at the local level,” says Emily Christiansen, V08. “We believe this is because they’re not sure what to do and how they can help.” So Christiansen, with classmate Nadia Stegeman, V08, sought and received a \$1,000 grant from the **Tisch Civic Engagement Fund** to allow the student-run Veterinary Disaster Medicine Club to reach out to local veterinarians. Their plan: to mobilize Cummings students to inform Worcester-area veterinarians about how to join existing rescue teams. They’ll also connect interested veterinarians with local emergency management personnel to help develop emergency plans that provide for pets. The club is developing a website and brochure to educate veterinarians and the general public.

In addition, three Cummings faculty have been recognized with **Tisch**

Faculty Fellowships. Dr. Mary Rose Paradis, who received the award for her advisory role in Gap Junction, is also faculty advisor for the neonatal foal volunteer team (see “New Season, New Life,” summer 2006). Dr. Gretchen Kaufman, J76, V86, earned a fellowship for advancing environmental issues within the veterinary profession and for instituting “Greening the Grafton Campus.” And Dr. Joann Lindenmayer, V85, was honored for advancing public health issues within the framework of veterinary medicine.

Lindenmayer is also faculty advisor for the **Schweitzer Fellowship Program**, an international program founded on Albert Schweitzer’s philosophy of “reverence for life” embracing all forms of life. The program aims to “reduce disparities in health and healthcare by developing leaders in service” through interdisciplinary community service projects. Cummings Schweitzer Fellows have instituted Gap Junction; Eldercorps Services, to place companion pets in the homes of the elderly; the P.A.W.S Project, to help people with immune deficiencies care for their pets; and NOW/The Clothesline Project, to raise awareness of domestic abuse.

Cider enjoys a good bedtime story



GRIEF SUPPORT AT CUMMINGS

Anyone grieving over the loss of a beloved pet—or agonizing with a euthanasia decision—can call, at no charge, the Cummings Pet Loss Support hotline at 508-839-7966. This service, initiated by former veterinary student Tami Pierce, V97, is staffed entirely by first- and second-year veterinary student volunteers who receive credit. Over 100 students have served on the hotline since it began in 1996. Its operation relies entirely on the financial support of private donors.

Trained by a licensed psychologist, volunteers increase their ability to empathize and learn communication skills that, as veterinarians, they will draw upon to support clients in bereavement. “They get to see the range of emotions that people feel about veterinarians, about their pets, about loss, about disease,” says faculty advisor Dr. Lisa Barber. “People talking with a veterinarian wearing a white coat may not voice all their thoughts and feelings. By staffing this hotline, students gain a window into those thoughts and feelings, so that when they are in the ‘white coat’ situation they can understand better what they may not be hearing from the client.”

Veterinary students also build grief support skills in the Pet Hospice Program now under development at Cummings. The program will be managed and staffed by veterinary student volunteers trained by a licensed grief counselor and working under the guidance of faculty advisors. “Our students spend night and day learning facts; it’s easy to get swept away and forget that being a veterinarian is also about the people they’re helping,” says faculty advisor Dr. Jean Poulson. “Hospice work will help keep that human aspect fresher. If they can do this, they can do just about anything.” Clients, she feels, will appreciate having a veterinary student to turn to for extra support and communication as their pets’ lives draw to a close. And in reaching out to collaborate with referring practitioners, students will begin to build a sense of community with them.

out the students’ careers as they encourage therapeutic animal-human relationships in the communities where they live and practice. Among those seeds, she says, is the spirit of compassion “for all living things on the planet, human and non-human. And bringing a dog or cat into an institution to visit with people who may have had their own animal in their previous lives, but now live with no animal contact, really does promote compassion.”

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AS LEARNING

Paws for People is just one of the Cummings School groups joining forces in a fledgling organization to enable them to share information and resources, collaborate on complementary or overlapping missions, and seek funding together. Each group, however, will retain its individual identity, touching the community in its own unique ways. The broader aim of this initiative, conceived by Dr. Mary Rose Paradis, is to develop a cohesive institution-wide approach to active citizenship and community outreach as integral components of learning. It’s a view of veterinary education that encompasses leadership development with an eye towards encouraging veterinary students to become a force for education and outreach in the communities they will serve as professionals.

“Service is almost innate to a veterinarian,” says Paradis. “But there’s professional service and there’s community service. And sometimes it’s outside your profession that you get some of your best rewards.” She notes that many incoming students already know they want to perform community service. Others, over time, connect the dots among their innate attributes, the skills they’re learning, and the ways they can combine them in service to others.

Dr. Jean Poulson, faculty advisor for the budding Pet Hospice Program, looks forward to offering an elective hospice rotation to students through this new organization, yet to be named. With these kinds of educational opportunities, Cummings students are gaining hands-on and

face-to-face experience with a unique client-side perspective that complements what they’re learning in clinics. This balance will help them become more effective veterinarians equipped with strong communication and interpersonal skills. And their organizational involvement, including both professional and citizen outreach, is sharpening their leadership skills. As veterinarians they will be uniquely positioned to advance the bigger picture of the interrelationships among animals, people, and the environment within their communities and in society in general. And the bigger picture, says Paradis, is what it’s all about: “To reflect on what you’re doing and why. Why are you performing that service? Is there something we can do to stop it from being a necessity? You start to understand and address the underlying issues.”

TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

NEONATAL ICU TEAM: To volunteer for a shift to sit with newborn foals in the neonatal ICU unit (must be 18 or over), contact Maggie Underwood, neonatal technician, at 508.839.5395 (ask to page her) or via e-mail at Margaret.Underwood@tufts.edu

PAWS FOR PEOPLE: To inquire about upcoming events or on how to become a Pet Partner, or to make a donation, e-mail Debra Gibbs at pawsforpeople@tufts.edu or call 508.839.8741 and leave a message.

PET LOSS SUPPORT: For resources to help with the grieving process, or to download a donation form, visit www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss

TRAVIS FUND: This fund benefits injured and ill found animals (see “Case Solved,” this issue), as well as owned animals undergoing treatment when caring owners can’t afford the full cost. To make a donation, contact Shelley Rodman, Director of Development and Alumni Relations, at 508.839.7907.