

MSU

Veterinary Graduate

is the Cat's Meow in Alabama



By Patti Drapala
Photos by Tom Thompson

A dog has a master, a cat has a staff, and the felines in the metro-Huntsville area of Alabama have exclusive access to a veterinarian who understands their management style.

Stephanie Gandy-Moody, a 2007 graduate of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Mississippi State University, recently opened The Cat Hospital of Madison, Ala., a medical practice and facility that caters to cats and the people they own. No fur has to fly between kitties and their canine adversaries because there simply is no room for dogs at this “inn.”

Not having dogs to worry about is music to a cat’s ears. There is no cacophony of barking, growling, tail thumping and toenail clacking. Like Simon and Garfunkel, the felines enjoy the sounds of silence.

“You never have to raise your voice over barking dogs, and you never get drug up the hallway by an overexcited Himalayan,” Gandy said. “It is just calm and relaxed.”

Gandy has a long-standing interest in feline medicine, although she earned her undergraduate degree at MSU in poultry science. The native of Charlotte, N.C., grew up with a “dog person” — her mom — and, after some really serious begging, she got a horse at age 9. The horse, Brandy, is still with Gandy today, having turned 26 this year.

“Growing up, I always thought I was going to North Carolina State University, but when it came time for me to make a decision, NCSU just didn’t feel right,” Gandy said.

While studying for a health occupations competition for high school students, Gandy overheard the school secretary talk about her daughter being accepted to veterinary school at Mississippi State. Intrigued, Gandy applied and was accepted 3 weeks later.

“I was ecstatic, but my mother was completely against the idea,” she said. “My dad and I drove to Starkville for the first time, and I just fell in love.”

Gandy’s first stop, of course, was the veterinary school. She met student affairs coordinator Barbara Coats and academic affairs adviser Mikell Davis, who gave her a tour and answered questions.

At MSU, Gandy also met two of the great loves in her life, future husband Edward Gandy, who was a poultry science major, and a cat named Noah.

“I wanted a pet to keep me company while studying, but I didn’t want to be tied down with a dog, and so I got a cat,” Gandy said. “Noah was great company but always into everything so I decided to get another cat, Pete, to keep him company.”

She headed to the Columbus-Lowndes County Humane Society and picked out an adorable red-and-white tabby. But Pete had other ideas when Gandy put him in the car.

“He went crazy,” Gandy said. “I almost returned him, afraid that I had picked out a feral cat.”

Pete soon settled in and the romance was on.

After graduation, Gandy was accepted into veterinary school and looked forward to achieving her dream of becoming a veterinarian. However, a tragic event suddenly turned the world upside down. Gandy's husband Edward was killed in a car accident the spring semester of her freshman year in veterinary school.

"This was a devastating blow to a young woman just starting veterinary school and looking forward to a long productive life with her husband," said Phil Bushby, a veterinary professor whose philosophy Gandy sought to emulate. "The courage, the perseverance, the tenacity that this young lady showed to even stay in school was an inspiration to all of us."

Gandy persevered with the support of faculty, students and her cats. Her gift to her cats was a decision to specialize as a feline practitioner.

"Stephanie was a great student," said Sharon Grace, the feline specialist at the veterinary school. "She understands that cats can't be bullied into submission. It takes much finesse to work with them."

Gandy served as president of the MSU student chapter of the American Association of Feline Practitioners and remains active in that organization as a professional. She earned externships with some of the premier feline specialists in the country.

She "gets" cats. Many of her clients do also, which presents a real challenge in determining what route to take in maintaining the best interests of the cat.

"The majority of 'cat people' consider their cat like a child," Gandy said. "They come in the hospital with a perceived notion of what's wrong with their baby after reading information on the Internet. Right, wrong or indifferent, you have to earn their trust."

The feline patients, masters of indifference, sense this.

"Cats have a built-in timer," Gandy said. "You have to work quickly but gently because when time is up, it is up. Submission doesn't work with cats."

If her cat patients do not look forward to seeing her, Gandy's husband, Michael Moody, does.

"Michael was a classmate of mine and is my greatest support system," Gandy said. "We have no children yet, but our 'furbabies' include our kitties, Noah, Pete, Lucky, Isabelle and Sassy; my first horse Brandy; and our dogs, Jax, Eli and Angel."

This is an extended family that Gandy loves to come home to after a busy day at the practice. When she arrives, Michael and the dogs are ready to meet and greet. Savoring the mystery, the cats bide their time.

"Cats are more independent, and you have to work a little harder to gain their affection," she said.

Who said anything about a little cat hair flying around!



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Dr. Gandy-Moore and assistant Kay Hooper prepare a client for some claw-care (photo at top of page).