

DEVELOPMENT CORNER



Dr. Sharon Grace

New CVM Program Ushers in a “SAFE HAVEN” for Pets

By Amy Cagle

In early 1996, news headlines across the nation recounted the tale of a kitten whose male owner tortured her violently and set her ablaze. Her “crime” had simply been missing the litter box.

The kitten, later known as Cleopatra, was rescued by a neighbor and brought to the Animal Health Center in Franklin, Tenn., a suburb of Nashville. The owner of the clinic was Dr. Sharon Grace, a Mississippi State University doctor of veterinary medicine graduate. Despite the loving care Dr. Grace provided, Cleopatra had to be euthanized several months later.

Soon after, Dr. Grace began operating a Safe Haven for Pets program from her clinic — picking up the tab out of her own pocket. The need for this service, which she provided through a battered women’s shelter, grew along with her passion for its cause. Her focus is not on animal rights, but rather on the welfare and humane treatment of animals. When Dr. Grace speaks at conferences, she typically talks about animal cruelty from a veterinarian’s perspective and firsthand experience.

“I have lost three of my pets due to cruelty, and I now feel like it is my calling to educate and assist, as well as treat,” she said.

A presentation by Dr. Grace during a Humane Society of the United States Conference inspired a New York social worker to lobby for stronger laws against animal cruelty in her home state. The story of Cleopatra’s plight also led to changes in the animal laws of Tennessee and New York. Both states upgraded their charges of aggravated cruelty to animals from misdemeanor to felony offenses. Cleopatra’s story even became part of the training curriculum for all municipal police recruits in New York.

Vivid memories of the kitten continue to motivate Dr. Grace’s efforts as well. She returned to Mississippi State in 2000 as a clinical professor on the CVM faculty. In 2004, the university recognized Dr. Grace as its CVM Alumna of the Year for her work in the veterinary community. She teaches one of CVM’s most popular courses — a 4-week elective called “The Feline Patient” — and has written a book with the same title.

Dr. Grace’s mission continues to be educating others about the life cycle of violence and fulfilling her dream of launching a Safe Haven for Pets program on a larger scale at her alma mater. Creating awareness and understanding through training is what she hopes to offer MSU’s clinical students with exposure to the program.

The cycle of violence to which Dr. Grace refers is the link between child abuse and domestic violence, which, in turn, is linked to animal cruelty.

“When people think about domestic or child abuse, they don’t automatically think that the abuse extends to pets,” she

explained. "Usually animals are the first victims in the cycle of violence because abusers use them as leverage with humans."

Animal victims are generally small, harmless creatures like cats, dogs, rabbits, birds, rodents and reptiles. Animal victims suffer torture, often leading to death.

The majority of domestic violence shelters across the nation do not accommodate pets. If pets must be left behind, women will often delay entry into these shelters.

"It is common for batterers to harm their partners' pets," Dr. Grace said. "Statistics tell us that the majority of battered women do not enter shelters sooner for fear of what will happen to their children and their pets. Therefore, a way to get battered women in the system and prevent child abuse is to provide care for the family's pets."

Violence toward animals is often ignored by society and not considered a serious problem, but Dr. Grace said she believes it is an indicator of future violence against all species, including humans.

"Dr. Grace is one of the few veterinarians in the nation to have experience with this type of pet program, and Mississippi State is extremely lucky to have her paving the way in this area," said Dr. Philip Bushby, a professor of clinical science who holds the Marcia Lane Chair in Humane Ethics and Animal Welfare in the College of Veterinary Medicine.

The Safe Haven program is one of nine initiatives supported by the Humane Ethics and Animal Welfare Program at Mississippi State. Mississippi State's veterinary college stands to become one of a few veterinary colleges in the nation with a program of this kind.

The goal of the MSU Safe Haven for Pets program, according to Dr. Grace, will be threefold. First, the program will provide a service for the state of Mississippi to assist often-overlooked needy women, children and pets. Second, it will provide a template for teaching CVM students the importance of community service. Third, the program ultimately could become a national model for other Safe Haven pet programs.

"I want Mississippi State to become a flagship for other universities," Dr. Grace explained.

Nestle Purina, the Copwood Hill Foundation and Pfizer have already committed start-up funds for the Safe Haven for Pets project. The number of donors interested in the unique program is growing, but private gifts are still needed to encourage partnerships statewide.

Donors may make contributions for the Safe Haven for Pets program by visiting the MSU Foundation online at www.msufoundation.com or by contacting Keith Gaskin, senior director of development at 662.325.3815 or kgaskin@foundation.msstate.edu.

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