

Winn-Win

Winn Feline Foundation Celebrates 50 Years of Funding Veterinary Research for Cats

by Jen Reeder

Renowned pet journalist Steve Dale shared a special bond with his cat, Ricky. The white Devon Rex loved to perch on Dale's shoulder and was so intelligent that he could play improvisational jazz on a child's piano and perform tricks like jumping through hula hoops or over dogs, which led to numerous television appearances.

"Ricky allowed me to show people, 'This is what a cat can be,'" Dale said. "I don't know that I've ever had a bond like I had with this one cat."

After playing the piano for about 25 people at an AAHA-accredited animal hospital in Chicago, Ricky had an exam that raised a red flag for heart disease. Further testing revealed a devastating diagnosis: feline hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM). Dale and his wife gave Ricky prescribed medications and, due to concerns over Ricky's health, turned down the chance for the cat to appear on the *Late Show with David Letterman*.

But HCM is fickle. One day, while Dale was in his home office, Ricky looked at him while he was eating and suddenly toppled over.

"I think the entire city of Chicago heard me scream," Dale said.



For 50 years, the Winn Feline Foundation has worked to advance feline health by funding research and education.



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He rushed Ricky to the animal hospital, but it was over.

To help prevent other cat lovers from having to lose a cat to HCM, Dale approached the nonprofit Winn Feline Foundation about establishing a fund for HCM research. Since being established in 2002, The Ricky Fund has raised more than \$300,000, and research has yielded some advances: For instance, breeders can now give a cheek swab for a gene mutation in Maine Coons and ragdolls to see if the cat is at risk for HCM.

While there's still much more work to be done, Dale has the utmost confidence in the Winn Feline Foundation's commitment to funding research; he even joined the board of directors in 2004.

"We're a group that comes from different perspectives, but we all have at least one thing in common, and that is that we want to better cat health," he said. "I am so proud that each time we get together, we're able to forward that mission."

For 50 years, the Winn Feline Foundation has worked to advance feline health by funding research and education. Founded in 1968 with a \$125 donation from the Cat Fanciers' Association, the nonprofit has now funded more than \$6 million in research around the world.

"It is a tremendous achievement to take this first donation and be able to fund more than \$6.4 million in cat health studies since that time," said Vicki Thayer, DVM, DABVP (Feline), executive director of the Winn Feline Foundation. "There's no question that we owe a huge debt of gratitude

to the early founders and leaders of Winn. We would not be where we are without the groundwork they laid on funding important cat health studies."

In the early 1980s, the organization funded research into feline leukemia before the disease even had a name (at the time, it was called "the lymph node illness"), which was one of the first times an organization had funded feline health studies in a significant way. In 1987, Winn-sponsored researchers at the University of California, Davis—Niels Pedersen, DVM, PhD, and Janet Yamamoto, PhD—identified the virus that causes feline immunodeficiency virus. That same year at the same institution, a team lead by Paul Pion, DVM, DACVIM, discovered that taurine deficiency often leads to dilated cardiomyopathy in cats, which changed standards for commercial cat food.

"Adding taurine to cat foods has significantly decreased this cause of death in cats," Thayer said.

Now the organization funds around \$500,000 of research each year, a number that should easily double in the next decade, according to Drew Weigner, DVM, president-elect of Winn Feline Foundation and owner of AAHA-accredited The Cat Doctor in Atlanta, Georgia (the first cats-only practice in the Southeastern United States). He said current Winn-sponsored research has the potential to not only help cats but humans as well, such as a study into stem cell transplants to produce insulin—and potentially cure diabetes.

"It's a very exciting proposal, and it's in its infancy, but it does have far-reaching consequences for [a]



possible cure," he said. "If it does this in cats, then there's a good chance that they can figure out how to do this with people as well."

Winn has already had a major impact on treating diabetes in cats. Weigner said that in 1999, the nonprofit funded a study proposal from Deborah Greco, DVM, PhD, DACVIM, to explore the effect of a low-carbohydrate, high-protein diet when the idea was controversial; the prevailing wisdom was to feed diabetic cats a high-fiber diet. The review committee—veterinary practitioners, researchers, cat owners, breeders, and industry professionals—approved funding for the radical idea after reviewing the data.

Greco's findings, published in 2003, demonstrated the effectiveness of a low-carb, high-protein diet to treat cats with diabetes and changed the standard of care.

"It really is the type of high-risk, high-gain research that Winn is known for," he said, adding, "The

organization is not only the biggest player in feline research, it now has the largest impact on feline medicine, period."

Weigner said Winn hosts the annual Winn Feline Foundation Symposium on Feline Health to educate a wide variety of people he affectionately terms "cat geeks" about current research but also to learn what issues are important to them. While the group has to some extent flown under the radar for the last half-century, it is expanding rapidly, and he hopes more veterinary professionals will contact Winn about topics of interest.

"We need to hear from veterinarians which issues are foremost on their minds in order to be able to continue our mission to benefit 'every cat, every day,'" he said. "We have a direct effect on what research is getting done and how veterinary medicine is going to evolve."

Glenn Olah, DVM, PhD, DABVP (Feline), president of the Winn Feline

Foundation and veterinarian at Albuquerque Cat Clinic in Albuquerque, New Mexico, agreed. He said the organization offers scholarships to veterinary students and two \$15,000 grants for "new investigators" each year and is currently funding research into three areas he believes will have the same level of impact as the taurine findings of the 1980s, development of the leukemia virus vaccine, and other key milestones.

"The first major impact, I think, is going to be stem cell applications in therapy," Olah said. "What disease conditions will have the biggest impact is hard to say. But I can tell you already we're seeing a major impact on gingivitis stomatitis syndrome. . . . Will these cats respond to the stem cell research without having to have full mouth extractions? That's exciting."

He also cited research into using probiotics—instead of antibiotics—to treat kitten diarrhea that could have ramifications for treating cats with inflammatory bowel disease



or other gastrointestinal issues. Last but not least is the work of esteemed researcher Niels Pedersen, DVM, PhD, to treat feline infectious peritonitis (FIP).

When methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) became huge issues in human medicine, Pedersen noted similarities with the coronaviruses that cause FIP and began studying them, Olah said.

"He paired up with the human side of medicine and looked at some of the inhibitors—medications or molecules that inhibit certain important steps in the life cycle of the coronavirus for SARS and MRSA—and looked to see if it actually might have some use against the feline coronavirus," Olah explained. "Sure enough, he found a few. Amazing results."

After extensive research and screening many drugs to investigate which ones worked best against the FIP virus and were not toxic to cat cells, Pedersen treated cats with confirmed FIP, which was formerly a death sentence, with a new class of antivirals. The cats treated before the virus had entered their nervous systems survived.

Along with many experts in feline medicine, Weigner shares Olah's excitement about the breakthrough: "The research that Niels Pedersen has done is analogous to when they first came out with antiretroviral drugs for AIDS, where it took people on death's door and made them better. That's what is done with some of these cats with FIP. . . . I met some of these cats; they look totally normal."

Pedersen, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the Center for Companion

Animal Health in the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California, Davis, confirmed that there are at least two drugs moving toward commercialization.

"There's no doubt that antiviral drugs of the type that are used in human medicine for RNA viruses like HIV and other viruses are the same types of things that will end up being used to treat successfully most—probably not all, but most—of the cats with FIP in the future," he said. "When is that going to be? I don't know. That's the thing. One year from now? Two years from now? I hope no more than two. I hope we can do it in one, but we'll see."

He emphasized that although the drugs are related to those used for hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS in people, they are different enough to have required screening in feline cell

cultures and laboratory cats for effectiveness and lack of toxicity.

Pedersen is grateful the Winn Feline Foundation has supported his work since the early 1970s.

"As far as I'm concerned, if I've ever needed help, they've always been there for me," Pedersen said. "Have they been meaningful to me and important in my life, and have I respected what they've done for cats? Yes, I do. A lot."

Obviously, there are many leaders in veterinary medicine who are grateful to the Winn Feline Foundation for helping fund researchers like Pedersen. Jane Brunt, DVM, executive director of the nonprofit CATalyst Council and owner of AAHA-accredited Cat Hospital at Towson in Baltimore, Maryland, said many people have worked tirelessly to promote cats and seek answers to their unique and specific health needs through Winn, including Pedersen, Thayer, Dale, and former Winn president and Cat Fanciers' Association board member Joan Miller.

"With the dedication and foresight of the Cat Fanciers' Association and generosity of Robert H. Winn, the Winn Feline Foundation has been dedicated to promoting and funding much-needed feline-specific research for more than five decades," she said. "It's people like these who help keep cats healthy, so cats can continue to keep us healthy. Congratulations and thank you, Winn Feline Foundation!"

Paula Monroe-Aldridge, DVM, president of the American Association of Feline Practitioners, said that for 50



years, the Winn Feline Foundation's commitment to feline research has been unparalleled.

"Through their unwavering commitment to research, they have made an extraordinary difference in the lives of countless felines and their caregivers," she said. "The American Association of Feline Practitioners congratulates the Winn Feline Foundation on all their great accomplishments thus far and eagerly anticipates their substantial achievements of the next 50 years!"

Michael Cavanaugh, DVM, DABVP (Emeritus), AAHA CEO, said the Winn Feline Foundation has done so much to support research on many different important feline diseases while concurrently educating both cat lovers and veterinary teams on all they have learned.

"Winn Feline Foundation recently announced new grants for 11 studies covering FIP, FeLV, lung and oral cancers, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, toxoplasmosis, pain management in osteoarthritis, feline obesity, and even population measurement. This support is representative of the work the Winn Feline Foundation has been doing now for 50 years," Cavanaugh said. "We applaud the important contributions that the Winn Feline Foundation has made to scientific research over the past 50 years." ❁



Award-winning freelance journalist Jen Reeder is inspired by the passion of everyone involved with the Winn Feline Foundation.

