Faculty Focus: Adrian R. Morrison, Jr., D.V.M., Ph.D.
Name: Adrian R. Morrison, Jr.
Birthplace: Philadelphia, PA
Marital status: Married, five children
Position: Professor Emeritus of Behavioral Neuroscience, Department of Animal Biology, School of Veterinary Medicine
Degrees:
1. B.A., Franklin and Marshall College, 1957
2. D.V.M., Cornell University, 1960
3. M.S., Cornell University, 1962
4. Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 1964
Research interests: During nearly four decades of research in Penn’s Laboratory for the Study of the Brain in Sleep, Morrison has explored the nature of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep in cats. These studies have helped uncover the causes and effective treatment for REM behavior disorder in humans, a neurological malady in which people literally act out their dreams, often injuring themselves or others.
Dr. Morrison and members of his lab are working to determine what structures prevent behavioral arousal from rapid eye movement sleep, given that the brain in REM exhibits most of the features of the brain in alert wakefulness. They employ primarily behavioral and pharmacologic techniques. Their current focus is the role of the amygdala [a group of nerve cells adjoining the temporal lobe of the brain and involved in emotions of fear and aggression] in the control of REM onset and its maintenance.
Other research projects: “We’ve now moved into studying sleep in relation to post-traumatic stress disorder. I’ve worked with my colleague at the Veterans Administration Hospital for more than 20 years; he came to work in the lab because he was trained in neurophysiology and also as a clinician. So we’ve studied sleep in post-traumatic shock disorder patients. I would like to find a drug that, if you gave it to people right after trauma, they wouldn’t have these terrible memories and disruptions of sleep. And only about 30 percent of the people who are part of or witness a traumatic event actually experience it this problem.”
The author: Dr. Morrison has authored or co-authored more than 150 journal articles and seven books. He has just finished writing a book, Animal Rights and Human Obligations: The Boundaries of Humanity. “It is both science and some personal insights,” he explained, “and it covers the gamut as far as animals go and different animal uses; it’s not just about biomedical research. It explores what animals are, how they might think, and so forth.”

Never one to rest on his withers, Dr. Morrison has already started writing a book called REM Sleep: A Biography. “I’ve spent my life with REM sleep, and you work with a phenomenon for much more than half your life, and it becomes a person—so that’s why I’m calling it a biography. It’s more on the edge, but more toward the science audience, particularly students, but a layperson can also gain from it.”

Beginnings: “When I went to Pisa, Italy in 1964 it was not strictly to study sleep at all, but it had something more to do with reticular formation [the part of the brain involved in stereotypical actions, such as walking, sleeping and lying down]. But I got over there, and I was placed in the lab with a person who studied muscle control in sleep. It was just chance that I got into this REM Sleep Behavior Disorder.”

Sidekick: Photos of Buster, his cat, adorn the wall of Dr. Morrison’s office, alongside those of his grandchildren and other family members. “Over the years, I’d been so focused on trying to defend biomedical research, that I was not thinking about how much I love animals, and Buster brought me back to that reality. And in my lectures, I refer to him sometimes, so I’m kind of crazy about him. I entered him into a cute animal contest six or seven years ago. I called the picture ‘The Cat in the Vat.’ He should have won.”

Future plans: “Writing books will keep me going for a long time. I just told my wife today that I won’t ever be a pest in terms of retiring. I often say that I would sort of like to die in this office so I wouldn’t have to clean it out or do anything; somebody else would have to do it,” Dr. Morrison said as he swept his arm across his space covered with perhaps thousands of shelved and unshelved books, photos, scientific objects, personal keepsakes—the memorabilia of 40-plus years of teaching and research. “How do you clean up something like this?”