The Ballad of Joey and Jamie

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The Ballad of Joey and Jamie

The following was written in March 2007 by Tony Rodgers and Mary Jane Cullin, clients of the Ryan Veterinary Hospital whose cat underwent a kidney transplant at Penn Vet. Tony and Mary Jane were so appreciative of the care and expertise they received, they made a gift that enabled the Feline Renal Transplant Program to purchase a new video system.

We met Joey on a trip to the Massachusetts SPCA in October 1991, a month after losing our Bernie to kidney disease at the age of 18. We had no plans to adopt another cat—just to warm our hearts with a trip to the shelter. Then Joey reached his paw through his cage, begging to be picked up. The thought of him being left behind was too much to bear, and within minutes, he was on the way home with us.

When he was about 11 years old, Joey was diagnosed with early-stage chronic renal failure. We were familiar with kidney disease because of Bernie’s long battle, and it was painful to realize Joey would face the same sad end.

By chance, we found out that renal transplant was an option while scouring the Internet for support. Our local vet clinic did not offer such advanced procedures; the hospitals that did were in New York, Philadelphia, the Midwest and California. Since Mary Jane was working in Philadelphia at the time, we decided to try Penn.

Joey had his first appointment at Penn Vet in summer 2003. We couldn’t believe that Dr. Lillian Aronson [V’92, assistant professor of surgery]—that same nationally recognized superstar, with her incredible career dedicated to feline renal transplants—was seeing Joey! Alicia Preston [a renal transplant nurse then at Ryan] and Dr. Dottie Brown [assistant professor of surgery] pre-screened Joey, and we knew immediately that Penn Vet was where we wanted to be—it’s just the feeling you get being there. It is a wonderful place.

Joey was not sick enough to have the transplant then, but we were comforted that he would be considered as a candidate. We made Joey look sweet and kept him in a good mood, as he can be demanding. We brought toys and toothbrushes to the appointments; he loves to rub his nose on toothbrushes and it seems to calm him.

After that first appointment, Joey was put on subcutaneous fluids, and his progress monitored to catch any serious fall-off in his kidney function. He had check-ups every couple of months at the MSCPA’s Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston by renal specialist Dr. Chris Rollings, who once had worked with Dr. Aronson at Penn Vet.

With Dr. Aronson’s guidance, we weighed the decision to do the transplant against the possible risks. We knew as soon as the kidney disease began to interfere with his quality of life or if he was reaching end-stage failure, he would be operated on immediately. I was amazed at the care, support and patience we were given by Penn Vet staff over those many months of considering the options. It was a labor of pure dedication and love on their part.
In summer 2005 we knew it was time. Joey had maintained well on the fluids for almost two years. But he now was very thin, slept most of the time and wasn’t enjoying his normal routine. He was fading away in front of our eyes, and we were not willing to deprive him of the chance to live as robustly as possible. In November, we made the transplant appointment, and drove to Philadelphia the first week of December.

It’s hard to describe Lillian Aronson: she has a serene, ethereal presence, incongruous with her down-to-earth nature. As much as we were taken with her medical knowledge, we were overwhelmed by her compassion for both patients and owners. Our respect for her abilities was equaled only by our appreciation of her warmth and caring. We met the doctor, but we fell in love with the person.

The real surprise about the renal transplant program involves the most obvious hero of the story, the kidney donor cat, who is required to be adopted into the family post-transplant. Before Joey’s operation, Jamie Meyer [renal transplant nurse] introduced us to Ryan’s donor pool. All the cats were wonderful, so we asked Jamie to choose. She was smitten with one who had been in the program over a year. He was such a “love bug,” as they called him, you’d swear you saw little cartoon hearts popping from his eyes! We felt so hard for him that, out of gratitude, we named him Jamie.

The last part of the story is YoYo, another transplant-program donor we took home. When Joey was in recovery after the transplant, Tony spent time outside his cage to keep him company (with toothbrush, naturally). The transplant scheduled after Joey’s involved YoYo as a donor, but during surgery he was deemed unsuitable to donate. Tony got to know YoYo as he recovered in Joey’s ward over the next few days, and we were told YoYo would be put up for adoption. Of course, we said not to bother; he was coming home with us! So that’s how we ended up with two Penn Vet transplant program kitties instead of just the donor.

We both wanted to give to Penn Vet because of the gift of life given to Joey by everyone involved in the renal transplant program. We felt fortunate to have found Dr. Aronson, so it was easy for us to want to give something back to her and the Hospital, whose staff truly love animals and understand what they mean to their owners. We wanted to express our gratitude and help other animals suffering from kidney disease. Our gift was personally fulfilling because it gave us a way to be a small part of Dr. Aronson’s program. In the long run, it is truly a healthy thing to give a little back when you’ve received so much.

—TONY RODGERS AND MARY JANE CULLIN

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**JULY 2007**

**July 16**
6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. – Penn Vet Alumni Reception
The 144th AVMA Annual Convention
Washington Convention Center, Washington, DC

**AUGUST 2007**

**August 18**
6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. – Penn Vet Alumni Reception
The 125th PVMA Annual Scientific Meeting
Hershey Lodge and Convention Center, Hershey, PA

**SEPTEMBER 2007**

**September 7**
2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. – Veterinary Medical Alumni Society Executive Board Meeting
Vernon and Shirley Hill Pavilion, Philadelphia, PA

**September 8**
All day – Third Annual Carnivale of the Dogs, with Commerce Bank, Penn Vet will host a M*A*S*H* Tent and “Ask the Vet” booth
Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, PA

**September 29**
All day – Parents & Partners Day
Philadelphia and New Bolton Center

**OCTOBER 2007**

**October 19**
Evening – Rush Shippen Huidekoper Society Dinner
Philadelphia

**October 27**
Evening – Alumni Reunion Dinner
New Bolton Center, Kennett Square, PA

**NOVEMBER 2007**

**November 2 to 4**
The Fourth International Equine Conference on Laminitis and Diseases of the Foot
Palm Beach County Convention Center, West Palm Beach, FL

For information, please visit www.laminitisconference.com.