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For Two Brothers, Twin Degrees Sow Divergent Paths

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by Joan Capuzzi Giresi, C'86 V'98

Marvin, C'46 V'48, and Irwin Rothman, C'40 V'41, know a thing or two about animals. But the two brothers, both Penn Veterinary Medicine graduates, probably don't know the same thing or two.

Take birds, for instance. Marvin can treat liver problems in parrots and excise feather cysts in cockatiels. But big brother Irwin, now a psychiatrist, is more apt to display his avian acumen in a more esoteric way: he can explain how woodpeckers are able to bang on trees without knocking themselves out.

Two entirely different approaches to animals, yet a common education and a shared upbringing.

The Rothman home in North Philadelphia, Marvin remembers, was never without cats and dogs: "Our parents were very fond of pets back when it wasn't so au courant, as it is today," he says.

For the Rothman boys, animals were an endless source of discovery and intellectual fascination. When young Irwin raised tadpoles, he would fast-forward their metamorphosis by administering thyroid hormone to them. Also enthralled with hypnosis, Irwin would commission Marvin to help him hypnotize the pets—and the other children—in the neighborhood.

True to their eastern European farming heritage, the elder Rothmans exposed their two children to livestock, with frequent visits to friends' homesteads in rural New Jersey. Marvin, 77, recalls his parents, who owned a small furniture store in Philadelphia, stoking their sons' desire to pursue veterinary medicine. "It was an unusual profession for immigrants' children to go into," he says.

As a veterinary student, Irwin questioned the risk vs. reward ratio of drugging animals for routine treatments, such as dental prophylaxis. Encouraged by the Penn faculty to find an alternative to chemical anesthesia, Irwin turned to his childhood hobby, hypnosis. Through hypnosis alone, he was able to adequately anesthetize birds and other small animals for minor procedures. Over the years, Irwin has become the Dr. Doolittle of hypnosis, producing trance-like states in everything from horses and monkeys to snakes and alligators.

After Penn, Irwin operated his own small animal practice out of his parents' home.

Although not yet a psychiatrist, he applied psychiatric principles in handling late-night calls from distressed pet owners. Often, he says, all these clients really wanted was to talk and be comforted.

During this time, Irwin also tried—unsuccessfully—to promote animal hypnosis within the veterinary profession. But, he says, his colleagues "wore hip boots and their attitude was if you couldn't step in it, it wasn't real."

Irwin realized that if he wanted to pursue hypnosis, it would have to be within the realm of human medicine. So, a decade after becoming a veterinarian, he earned the degree of



Marvin (standing) and Irwin Rothman.

Photography by Jon Adams/n5photos

Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine from Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine and became board certified in psychiatry. (The University of California, Irvine later granted him a medical degree based on educational requirements already fulfilled.)

While maintaining several Philadelphia-area hospital affiliations and teaching posts through the years—with an emphasis on hypnosis—Irwin, 83, used his work to explore the evolutionary connection between man and other animals. "There's a tremendous dislike of seeing human problems in an animal context." But, he continues, "man isn't a vegetable or a mineral. He is another animal."

Through his understanding of "comparative psychiatry," Irwin has helped smokers, stammerers, overeaters and impotent men "retrain" themselves, just as pets can be retrained. And he credits his veterinary background with aiding him to read between the lines with his human patients, like the woman who fiddled with her wedding ring while insisting that her failing marriage was blissful.

"You learn as a veterinarian to be much more observant of body language. In people, I pay as much attention to body language and facial expressions as I do to spoken words."

Irwin says that the veterinary "school" of thought, which stresses signs versus symptoms, has enabled him to distinguish physical from psychosomatic afflictions in his patients.

And his appreciation for the human-animal bond has been invoked in counseling sessions, even helping him to prevent a patient, distraught over the death of her dog, from committing suicide. His veterinary expertise has also been called into play by patients in whom he has diagnosed zoonotic infections that had confounded their family doctors, and by lawyers who have referred dog-bite victims to him for therapy.

Recently retired from private practice, Irwin, a widower, is researching his theory that war might be prevented if men are excluded from political negotiations. To do this, he is studying animals that have peaceful and matriarchal social structures.

Marvin traces his own veterinary roots back to his brother. "He was my hero figure and he went to vet school," Marvin says. "That inspired me a little."

Thanks to Irwin, Marvin was able to begin veterinary school with a full set of hand-me-down books and an accurate set of expectations. Both brothers recall experiencing subtle anti-semitism from some of the faculty and fellow students. At the time, the two percent quota for Jews was an unwritten but widely-known rule at the School.

Marvin maintains that the School today is nothing like the institution he attended. "It was during the war years," he recalls, "and they still had a lot of the old professors who were not so current."

Although Penn had a good small animal clinic, Marvin says, the School's emphasis was

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clearly farm animals. Hands-on experience was basically limited to a large and a small animal rotation, and an ambulatory clinic.

Marvin went on to an internship and residency at Boston's Angell Memorial Animal Hospital, at the time a far more sophisticated veterinary institution than Penn. He remained on the staff there for three years before being called into service with the Army Veterinary Corps during the Korean War. At Angell, Marvin rounded out his clinical experience through exposure to the newly-burgeoning veterinary specialties and the hospital's vast caseload, which included birds.

It was at Angell where veterinary medicine really "clicked" for Marvin, but he says that Penn gave him a solid foundation in the basic sciences. And his natural compassion for animals was deepened by example from some of his Penn professors.

"If you understand the human-animal bond," he says, "you know you're there to provide compassionate, quality medicine."

And that is what Marvin has been doing for almost five decades at Rothman Animal Hospital in Collingswood, N.J. He sold the practice, which still bears his name, 12 years ago to **Mark Esser, V'86**, but continues to work there. His lightened work schedule—35 hours a week, which he works alongside his wife Betty, who is the longtime office administrator, and four other doctors—leaves him plenty of time to participate in local charity work.

He says his proximity to Penn has given him access to advanced veterinary technologies, exposure to new techniques, and a constant influx of fresh knowledge from the new grads he hired through the years.

For Marvin and Irwin, veterinary medicine is the proverbial egg cooked in two vastly different ways. The one element that has always fascinated both brothers is the human-animal bond, which they often explore through traded stories and insights. Despite their divergent paths, the bond between Marvin and Irwin also remained strong.

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Magic Weisner Photo Correction

Because of an editing error, the photo of another horse accompanied "Magic at Pimlico!" a profile of Allen B. Wisner, V'65, and his work with Magic Weisner, published in the fall 2002 issue of *Bellwether*. The correct photo is at right.

We welcome your comments and suggestions, as well as information about errors that call for corrections. Please contact Helma Weeks, Director of Communications, at (215) 898-1475 or via e-mail at <hweeks@vet.upenn.edu>.



Magic Weisner in the post-Preakness Stakes parade.

Photo by Cindy Pierson-Dublay/horse-races.net