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VMD-PhD 40th Anniversary Alumni Reunion Symposium

Michael L. Atchison
University of Pennsylvania

Gift to Build VMD/PhD Endowment

Mindy Heyer, C'79, W'79, WG'80 and Andy Heyer W'79, WG '79 know the value of a Penn education. Three of their four sons are undergraduates at Penn, Harry W'12, PJ W'11, ENG'11, and William C'09, and their fourth son James graduated from Wharton in 2005. They are all also animal lovers, clients of Penn Vet's Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital, and in 2008 Mindy joined the School's Board of Overseers. Andy is a member of Penn's Board of Trustees.

The Heyers' decision to launch an endowment challenge for Penn Vet's VMD/PhD Program was driven by the desire to support a core priority of the School's capital campaign and encourage others to give.

"We know that the VMD/PhD program is essential for veterinary science and veterinary education. We wanted to invest in something that would make a difference in the future but would motivate people to take action now," said Mindy.

The gift matches one-for-one all gifts to the VMD/PhD's new endowment fund up to a total of \$500,000. The initial goal for the program is an endowment of \$1 million.

"Animal owners and lovers like us depend upon new treatments and scientific discoveries to help our pets live better longer lives."

For more information on participating in the Heyer Challenge contact Susan Miller, 215-898-2029 or mills@vet.upenn.edu

VMD-PhD 40th Anniversary Alumni Reunion Symposium

A Penn Vet 125th Anniversary Event

BY DR. MICHAEL L. ATCHISON, HOM'94
Professor of Animal Biology and Director of the VMD-PhD Program

More than 150 people gathered between March 19 and 21, 2009, to celebrate the Penn Vet Student Research Day and the VMD-PhD 40th Anniversary Alumni Reunion Symposium. Fifty percent of VMD-PhD alumni returned—along with the four previous and current program directors and all 28 current VMD-PhD students—for a celebration that included alumni talks, poster presentations, Phi Zeta inductions, panel discussions and parties.

Dr. Ralph Brinster, V'60, GR'64, HOM'66, Richard King Mellon Professor of Reproductive Physiology, who founded the VMD-PhD Program in 1969,



Dr. Ralph Brinster

opened the symposium with comments about the pioneering days of the program in which a high-caliber program was envisioned with high standards to train veterinarian-scientists for careers in biomedical research. The program developed close ties with the MD-PhD Program at Penn's School of Medicine, and 40 years later those ties persist. The Reunion Symposium was punctuated with comments by past directors **Drs. Richard R. Miselis, GR'73, V'73**, and **John Hall Wolfe, V'82, GR'86**, director of the Walter Flato Goodman Center for Comparative Medical Genetics, and myself. Returning alumni gave academic talks on neurosciences, regenerative medicine, cancer biology and infectious disease research, in line with the initiatives identified by the school as key areas of excellence. The symposium included an informal breakfast with **Dr. Joan C. Hendricks, V'79, GR'80**, the Gilbert S. Kahn Dean of Veterinary Medicine, and two fabulous parties at the Inn at Penn and World Café Live. By all measures, the symposium was a fantastic success.



Dr. Michael Atchison. Photo by Sabina Louise Pierce.

The Past Informs the Future

Over its 40-year history the VMD-PhD Program has remained true to its original mission as defined by Dr. Brinster: to train outstanding veterinarian-scientists who would be leaders in biomedical research, education and clinical medicine. To date the program has generated 54 VMD-PhD alumni, 85 to 90 percent of whom are in careers involving biomedical research. Penn's VMD-PhD alumni are an

accomplished crew, with more than one-third in top positions of dean, chair, head, director, president or CEO. The seven VMD-PhD alumni on Penn's faculty have produced more than 500 publications, have garnered more than \$50 million in external grant support and hold numerous leadership positions within the school. With 28 students currently in the program, it is clear that the number of alumni will dramatically increase in the future. I envision a program with 40 to 50 students, and research disciplines to expand beyond the traditional biomedical graduate groups. All this requires an expanded applicant pool and numerous sources of additional funds—and both these requirements are now being realized.

The Path to the Future

In 2001, assisted by program coordinator, **Michelle Darrah**, I initiated a vigorous advertising campaign to recruit new students into the program, to educate the public about the roles of veterinarian-scientists in research and to inform academic advisors and faculty about the opportunities for VMD-PhD training at Penn and the advantages of being a veterinarian-scientist. The results have been impressive, with a 700-percent increase in applicant pool, including a strong number of under-represented minority applicants. I look for a further doubling of the applicant pool in the future to supply a talented pool of high-caliber students for VMD-PhD studies.

Along with the increased applicant pool, student enrollment has nearly tripled, requiring additional funding sources. The program has garnered more support from the National Institutes of Health, the Armour-Lewis Foundation and Pfizer Animal Health, along with substantial investments by the Office of the Dean. The program is now poised to begin an ambitious campaign

to raise additional funding, including an endowment for VMD-PhD training and a scholarship fund specifically for students from under-represented minority and disadvantaged backgrounds. The groundwork for these initiatives has been laid, and numerous opportunities for investing into the program have been developed.

The Present as Springboard

The future of the VMD-PhD Program would be impossible without the highly talented and successful students currently in the program. These students perform PhD studies in more than a dozen graduate groups and subgroups within the university and publish their research in high-tier journals. Current VMD-PhD students represent Penn at numerous scientific conferences and national agencies and continually look for new ways to develop and expand the careers of veterinarian-scientists. Recruitment of new students into the program is easy when visiting applicants observe the excellence of our student body, the cohesiveness of our program and the community of students in the program. Our current students are the best recruiting tool, and during the past eight years; we have only lost three students to other institutions. I believe fun is important too, and students currently enjoy a summer BBQ party, a dinner party at my home in December and many less formal gatherings. With the right students in the program, an expanding applicant pool, the ability to garner additional funds, a well-designed curriculum, a track record of producing outstanding alumni and some fun parties to boot, the VMD-PhD Program is poised to expand to new levels and to explore new frontiers in what it means to be a veterinarian-scientist. The future looks very bright. ■



Alumni of Penn Vet's VMD-PhD Program.