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Family Weaves Golden Thread Amidst Tragedy

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by Joan Capuzzi Giresi, C'86 V'98

Thomas J. Weiner, V'78, is doing his part to crack down on human tragedy—the kind that befell him and his wife nearly five years ago when their athletic, seemingly healthy son died of a cardiac arrest while away at college.

Weiner and his wife Beverly have established the Matthew R. Weiner Cardiomyopathy Study Fund—named for their deceased son—which is being conducted at the Ryan Veterinary Hospital at Penn by assistant professor of cardiology **Meg M. Sleeper, V'92**. The cardiomyopathy study, using various breeds of dog, tracks blood levels of cardiac troponin I—an enzyme released from damaged heart muscle cells—in conjunction with echocardiogram and 24-hour holter monitor results.

The central hypothesis, that cardiac troponin I is a marker for arrhythmias with or without cardiomyopathy, could lead to the development of a screening test for increased risk of fatal arrhythmias in animals and people. Such a simple tool would be particularly useful in today's medical economy; Weiner explains, "Because of the insurance industry, we can't say, 'I want my perfectly healthy child to have EKGs and echos.'"

Since Matt's death, Weiner and his family have also become vocal advocates for the placement of defibrillators in public places and for organ-and-tissue donation. Of his family's targeted activism, he says, "We're trying to live our lives in a way that would make Matt proud of us."

Pride was a sentiment Matt's parents knew well. Their children have always been accomplished in mind and body. Ivy Leaguers all three, twins Matt and **Cristina (Tina), V'07**, and Kevin grew up nationally ranked swimmers.

Matt enrolled in the prestigious architecture program at Princeton University, where he was a member of the swim team. In March 1999, during his freshman year, he joined some teammates for a game of pick-up basketball. While playing, he collapsed and died of sudden cardiac arrest, ventricular arrhythmia.

The family was completely unprepared for the early death of a son and brother who had no known heart ailments. "He was not sick a single day in his life," Weiner laments.

If the devastation of losing a 19-year-old

child granted him license to dwell on the unfairness of life, Weiner instead drew on his inner effervescence to stay buoyant. Born in Newark, N.J., Weiner grew up in South Jersey as one of seven children in a household full of pets and, he says, "lots of optimism."

While in Rutgers University's Animal Science Program, he met fellow student Beverly Anne LoBiondo, whom he married in his first year of veterinary school. He said that Penn prepared him well—perhaps too well!—for private practice. "Academically, I felt good coming out of school," he says. "But in clinics there, you see the extraordinary rather than the everyday. You come out thinking that every scratching animal has some autoimmune disease."

After graduation, Weiner spent two years working for a small-animal practice. But the long hours convinced him that the only way to successfully meld career and family was to operate his own home-based practice. Beverly conducted market research and concluded that the small sub-

urb of Tabernacle, N.J., was primed for a new veterinary hospital. In 1980, the twins just 10 months old, the Weiners bought a home there and converted its three-car garage into a small-animal clinic.

"When my children woke up in the morning, they could run in to say hi," Weiner recalls. "I was there when they got on the school bus and when they got off."

Running his own solo practice, with Beverly as his lab director, offered him the flexibility to adjust his schedule to Halloween parades, ball games, and swim meets. He had struck a balance in life, relishing his play as well as his work.

Weiner says he feels indebted to the veterinary school for helping him establish a family-friendly career replete with autonomy. "The school has allowed me to have a profession in which I could schedule my work so that raising our family comes first."

To help return the favor to the School, Weiner helped solicit his classmates for the Class of 1978 Endowed Scholarship Fund, which became the most successful reunion

fund thus far, with gifts and pledges totaling nearly \$140,000. For his dedication and service to the School, Weiner recently was elected to its Board of Overseers.

Back at home across the bridge, the Weiners had always put their children above everything. They chose to send their kids to the prestigious Peddie School for the progressive education coupled with the added bonus of a nationally ranked U.S. swimming program.

Though his three children held common interests, Matt occupied a unique position in the family, recalls Weiner. "He was the hub

around which the wheel turned, as twin to Tina and older brother to Kevin."

Cristina, 23, whose swimming ability brought her as far as the U.S. Olympic Trials in 1996, is a Harvard graduate and first-year veterinary student at Penn with an interest in lab animal medicine and aquaculture. Kevin, 21, a senior at Princeton—where he is the captain of the swim team—is studying neuroscience, with a focus on brain

mapping in marine mammals.

Both Kevin and Cristina have become proponents of organ-and-tissue donation awareness. After their brothers' death, the family listed him as a donor because they recalled a family conversation a few years prior in which Matt expressed the desire to donate his organs after death.

At Harvard, Cristina started Youth for Organ Donation Awareness (YODA), a non-profit organization whose mission is to spread awareness throughout college campuses about the national organ shortage. YODA chapters have since sprouted up on campuses throughout the country, and Cristina plans to establish one at Penn. Kevin, who started a YODA chapter at Princeton, is waiting a year to apply to graduate school so he can dedicate himself to the organization.

Tom Weiner is petitioning his state legislature to allow families to obtain information about those who have received their loved ones' tissue and organs. "It is critical information that does lend some level of comfort to the

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VMAS Executive Board/Nestlé Purina Happy Hour

A Happy Hour, sponsored by the Veterinary Medical Alumni Society Executive Board and Nestlé Purina, was held in the Rosenthal Student Lounge on September 12, 2003. The Happy Hour gave members of the Executive Board the opportunity to welcome first-year students to Penn, as well as to socialize with their future colleagues from all the classes. Nestlé Purina continued its generous support of students by providing third-year students with free scrub shirts, which were distributed at the Happy Hour.

“Purina is proud to donate these scrub shirts, and to support the Happy Hour the past two years,” said Laura Eirmann, D.V.M., manager of regional veterinary communications, North America, for Nestlé Purina. “Penn Veterinary Medicine students and alumni clearly possess exceptional skills and expertise,” she continued. “While it is apparent they are an outstanding resource to the School, companion and large animal hospitals, and the larger veterinary community, their positive impact also is felt by others outside the university—by both animals and humans alike.”

Emily Jones, V'05, one of Nestlé Purina's student representatives, commented, “Nestlé Purina has been so generous in giving us the scrub shirts and in sponsoring the Happy Hour. On behalf of all the students, we are grateful for their continued support of our activities.”



Jack Bregman, V'66, and Daniel Bleicher, V'53, with students.



Nestlé Purina student representatives Meagan Connolly, V'06, and Emily Jones, V'05.

PennHIP[®] Seminars

PennHIP training seminars will be offered in conjunction with multiple upcoming veterinary annual meetings. The seminar consists of 7 hours of lecture (morning and afternoon) covering the current understanding of canine hip dysplasia with specific emphasis on the science to support the PennHIP radiographic procedure. Ample opportunity will be provided for hands-on practice of the technique through the use of bone and simulated mechanical models. Satisfactory completion of certification exercises will qualify the registrant for membership in the PennHIP network of trained veterinarians. The registration fee includes the cost of the distractor (necessary to perform the procedure), a training video, cost of certification exercises, and the PennHIP Training Manual. Technicians are welcome to accompany you, the veterinarian, for a small fee. A continental

breakfast, coffee breaks and lunch will also be included. Attendees will receive 6 hours of continuing education credit (from the University of Pennsylvania). For more information about the PennHIP program, or for updates on future training seminar dates, please visit the PennHIP website at <www.vet.upenn.edu/pennhip>.

Future seminars:

- Western Veterinary Conference
February 14, 2004, Las Vegas, Nev.
- Penn Annual Conference
March 10, 2004, Philadelphia, Pa.
- American Veterinary Medical Association Annual Convention
July 23, 2004 (tentative date)
Philadelphia, Pa.

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donor families,” Weiner says. The Weiner family is comforted by knowing that Matt lives on in his many tissue and organ recipients.

Weiner is also working to promote placing automatic external defibrillators (AEDs)—small, user-friendly devices that can be placed over the chest to assess heart rhythm and administer shocks if necessary—in public places. Such a device, which might have saved his son's life were one available, costs \$1,800 each, according to Weiner, and is “inexpensive when you consider what it can do.” Weiner is raising awareness of the importance of budgeting for AEDs by speaking to scouting groups, local sports teams, PTAs, townships, and school boards.

Last June, the Weiner family was instrumental in directing funds raised at the Matt Weiner Swim-a-thon, held at their local swim club, toward the purchase of AEDs for the community. And Tom Weiner has successfully turned heads with the fact that ventricular arrhythmia is a fatal rhythm disturbance that requires swift defibrillation only available through the use of AEDs. The Weiners' school district has purchased 10 AEDs, and Princeton University has bought several.

The “golden thread,” he says, is that two student deaths have been averted by the new AEDs at Princeton. A side benefit of the family's public-interest projects has been to deliver a degree of healing.

“We feel like we weren't done being Matt's parents,” Weiner explains, “but we feel we are continuing our role as his parents through our commitment to obtaining on-site AEDs and our organ-and-tissue donation awareness efforts.”

Moreover, if Weiner's cardiac troponin I study leads to the birth of simple testing for the stealth heart defect that claimed his son's life, individual risk can be assessed and untimely deaths perhaps forestalled.

For more information on organ-and-tissue donation, visit the Coalition on Donation website at <www.shareyourlife.org>.

For more information on automatic external defibrillators and placing them in your community, visit the American Heart Association website at <www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3007876>.