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Where Are They Now? Student Inspiration Award Winners Continue To Make a Global One Health Impact

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Where are they now?

Student Inspiration Award winners continue to make a global One Health impact

INTERVIEWS BY KAREN GROSS

Penn Vet students are known to go above and beyond in their studies and careers. Launched in 2008, the Student Inspiration Award has recognized those with the potential to advance the very frontiers of veterinary medicine—providing a $100,000 unrestricted grant to realize exceptional veterinary missions and projects. Prior to a proposed reunion this year, we caught up with past winners to find out how the grant has impacted their paths and their profession.
WHAT DID YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE WHEN YOU MADE YOUR WINNING PROPOSAL?

My primary goal was and still is to improve food animal welfare, and especially veterinary knowledge and involvement in these crucial issues. To this end, I sought to further my education and skill set by completing a PhD focused on cattle behavior and welfare.

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT COURSE OF STUDY?

I am in the midst of running my third and final animal trial focused on sickness behavior in beef cattle with Bovine Respiratory Disease. Given that this disease is one of the most problematic for the cattle industry, and that current diagnostic tools are insufficient, I hope that this work will contribute to the development of automated systems to detect behavioral changes in sick animals—and, down the line, improve outcomes for both cattle and producers.

DID THE STUDENT INSPIRATION AWARD INSPIRE YOUR CAREER, AND IF SO, HOW?

When I started veterinary school, I always imagined that I would work in some specialty field of small animal medicine, because I was bothered by the numerous welfare issues associated with raising and killing food animals. My approach has changed 180 degrees; I now believe that precisely because I am motivated to improve the lives of food animals, it is my obligation to be as involved as possible. When I say involved, I mean to contribute to the well-being of producers, their animals, and the consumers of these products. Only by being intimately involved, and having a balanced approach, can I hope to change the world—which is, as I see it, the goal of the Student Inspiration Award, and what I have been inspired to do.
WHAT DID YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE WHEN YOU MADE YOUR WINNING PROPOSAL?
The dairy industry in Thailand contains many small, family-owned dairy farms; it is traditionally the females of the house that perform the majority of the labor. My project is primarily focused on empowering the dairy industry, but ultimately the women farmers, by providing access to educational opportunities, international collaboration, and progressive ideas to support their farming industry.

WHAT HAVE YOU ACCOMPLISHED?
Originally, my primary goal was focused on creating a structure or “Dairy Education Center” in Thailand that would be the physical site for learning and support. In reality, the DEC organization has taken the form of mobile teaching workshops and has been an avenue for individuals from the U.S. and Thailand to collaborate on animal health projects. Twenty students and two veterinarians representing five different veterinary schools have traveled to Thailand to collaborate with hundreds of Thai students and farmers. We have offered workshops and lessons on a variety of subjects (beef, poultry, agriculture, fishing), not just dairy. The idea of the mobile teaching workshops has allowed the organization to be resilient and change with demands.

DID THE STUDENT INSPIRATION AWARD INSPIRE YOUR CAREER, AND IF SO, HOW?
I am currently an ER veterinarian at a nonprofit animal hospital, DoveLewis Emergency Animal Hospital in Portland, Oregon. The award provided an unparalleled opportunity to follow a dream of mine. I know I will continue to be involved in my project for decades into the future.
WHAT DID YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE WHEN YOU MADE YOUR WINNING PROPOSAL?

**Nikki:** Together we envisioned a cooperative-style goat breeding facility and farm, run by families, which would serve as a breeding stock for a micro-lending program. Furthermore, we sought to implement a sustainable animal health leadership training program via the cooperative.

WHAT HAVE YOU ACCOMPLISHED?

**Nikki:** Since 2012, we have successfully coordinated four trips to Haiti, brought over 20 veterinarians and veterinary students to Haiti to aid in our mission, and provided veterinary care for over 1,000 animals. We are now working closely with five farmers who are our “animal health leaders” to further maximize production and welfare. In order to ensure long-term sustainability of the program, we have applied for 501(c) (3) nonprofit status. We continue to bring in new veterinary student leadership and maintain strong ties to the communities we work with.

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT JOB?

**Nikki:** After graduating in May, I started my job as an associate veterinarian at the Banfield Pet Hospital in Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, where I am honored to be working with another VMD, Dr. Kirk Breuninger. Ultimately I would like to return to Penn and contribute to our One Health efforts. Particularly, I hope to find a way to work with underserved communities (domestically and abroad) via public health, shelter animal medicine, and production medicine.

**Lisa:** I’m working at the National Institutes of Health on research related to emerging zoonoses. As a researcher for the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, I aim to better understand the pathogenesis of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus. Our goal is to develop a vaccine to prevent the spread of the virus.

DID THE STUDENT INSPIRATION AWARD INSPIRE YOUR CAREER, AND IF SO, HOW?

**Lisa:** The experience has helped me better understand the potential impact that veterinarians can have to improve both human and animal health. You leave Penn Vet with feelings of empowerment and responsibility to tackle large-scale issues—not only related to the bubble of veterinary medicine—but also to human medicine, public health, and the environment.