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Dr. Linda Rhodes

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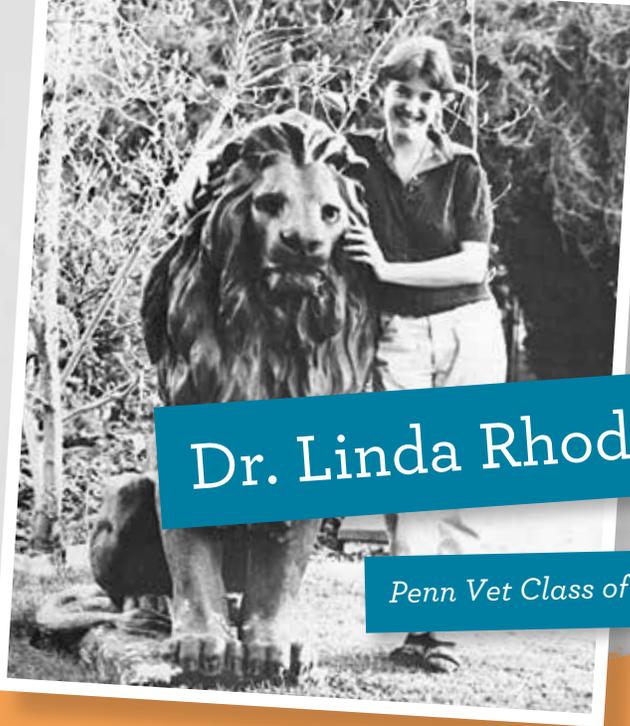


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Dr. Linda Rhodes

Penn Vet Class of 1978



“We still need a lot of encouragement for women as they rise up in their careers.”

Looking back at a career that has taken quite a few unexpected turns, Dr. Linda Rhodes laughs, “It was quite a ride!”

After turning down a PhD program in theoretical mathematics, she discovered a passion for veterinary medicine while living on a California commune, milking goats. However, “Back in 1973, when I was applying, most vet schools didn’t admit that many women,” Rhodes said, adding, “You had to apply in the state of which you were a resident.”

She had heard that Penn Vet was “gender neutral.” A native of New York, she moved across the state line to the small town of Hop Bottom, Pennsylvania, to become a resident while completing pre-vet courses.

At Penn Vet, “We had a number of strong women leaders, which was unusual then,” she said, pointing to Drs. Joan O’Brien, Elaine Hammel, and Jill Beech as mentors. Hammel, who was teaching field service, was “in her truck, helping cows, and that’s what I wanted to do,” Rhodes said.

Even after graduating fourth in her class, Rhodes struggled to find a job as a dairy cattle veterinarian. “I had 17 interviews. I heard comments like, ‘My wife isn’t comfortable with me riding around in the truck with a woman,’ and ‘Physically women can’t do this kind of work,’” she said.

After a short, reluctant stint in a small animal practice, she was finally accepted to a clinical internship at Utah State University. She continued working locally after the internship, focusing on herd health. At the time, she was the only female large animal veterinarian practicing in Utah.

Her path led back east to Cornell, where she was asked to teach part-time in the bovine palpation lab. After a sabbatical teaching embryo transfer to veterinarians in Israel, where she was the only female large animal veterinarian in the country, she was accepted to Cornell’s PhD fellowship program in physiology. “I could do research

on ruminants, particularly in reproduction. I enjoyed being in the library and the laboratory again,” Rhodes said.

After earning her PhD, Rhodes pursued a new career direction: pharma. “I saw an advertisement for a pre-clinical biology research position at Merck. They were delighted with my background. There was a real need for people with broad biomedical understanding who could do research on new drug targets.”

She worked on developing human drugs using animal models. “Then, Merck formed a joint venture—an animal health division called Merial. I headed up the clinical research department, focused on drugs for cattle, which was right up my alley,” she said.

In 2001, Rhodes left Merial to co-found AlcheraBio LLC, a consulting and contract research organization [CRO] focused on the animal health industry. “By the time we sold the company, we were running clinical trials for all top 10 animal health companies in the country as well as half a dozen companies from Europe,” she explained. “We pioneered an industry. There was not a big, full-service animal health CRO in the U.S. prior to AlcheraBio.”

Rhodes was about ready to retire when she received an offer she couldn’t refuse: serving as the founding CEO, and currently, as Chief Scientific Officer at Aratana Therapeutics. “I saw this as an opportunity that would completely change the animal health industry. The venture capital investors had discovered animal health and were willing to invest. We have over 20 drugs in development. Aratana has grown exponentially,” she said.

For Rhodes, several paths in veterinary medicine have converged with remarkable synergy. And she provides guidance to women who are finding their way to leadership positions in the animal health industry. “We still need a lot of encouragement for women as they rise up in their careers and encounter less pay for equal work, for example,” she said.