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STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

MEET FOUR PENN VET STUDENTS FOLLOWING THEIR OWN UNIQUE PATHS

BY LOUISA SHEPARD
Working at the Philadelphia Animal Hospital one summer, Felipe Garcia realized his path in a veterinary medicine career. A client came in who spoke only Spanish, and he instinctively offered to step in and translate.

Growing up in Miami, Garcia was the translator for his single mother, an immigrant from Mexico. She relied on her only child to help her navigate the English-speaking world.

“I realized that is something I can offer, since Spanish is my first language, to make sure that the language barrier does not stand in the way of care for a pet,” said Garcia, president of the Penn Vet Class of 2019. “It’s like a calling to help the people and animals where I grew up, a niche I can fill to give back to the community.”

That same summer, before his junior year at Hamilton College, Garcia was at Penn Vet participating in Summer VETS—a one-week program to give university and high school students hands-on experience at a vet school.

“I knew after that summer that this is what I wanted to do with my life,” Garcia said. “Penn was the only veterinary school I applied to. I was really set on Penn, primarily because of the Summer VETS program.”

Garcia is most interested in small animal medicine, and perhaps a specialty in surgery. “I am impressed with the caseload at Ryan Hospital and the focus on research,” he said.

Now 23, Garcia said he has always loved animals, collecting “animal facts” cards as a child and watching shows on the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. The summer after graduating from Coral Gables High School, he worked at the Jungle Island zoological park in Miami, helping the veterinarian.

“For me it didn’t feel like work,” he said. “I knew working with animals was something I wanted to pursue.”

A standout in the large, public high school, Garcia was on the Dean’s List, in the National Honor Society, and held the rank of captain in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) drill team, winning the Florida state championship at rifle spinning. He was the first in his family to graduate from high school.

Going to college was going to be a stretch, he knew, but he applied for scholarships—taking information from fliers on the counselors’ bulletin board. Winning a full, four-year scholarship through The Posse Foundation, Garcia chose Hamilton College in snowy upstate New York.

Hamilton was a challenge beyond the weather. Garcia says he had to work extra to catch up to his classmates. But like in high school, Garcia excelled at Hamilton, making the Dean’s List while working as a resident advisor, a biology laboratory teaching assistant, and a communications speech coach. He took part in student government as the senior class president, earned the 2014 campus service award, and even won the “Mr. Hamilton” pageant, a fundraiser.

Summers were spent working as a veterinary technician at the Philadelphia Animal Hospital. After graduating from Hamilton, he returned to Jungle Island as a vet tech and media spokesperson.

This summer, he plans to go on a Penn Vet trip to Thailand. Participants provide discounted and free veterinary care, performing spays and neuters in an effort to decrease the stray dog population.

Eventually, Garcia plans to return to his hometown, ideally to a small animal practice.

“In my community in Miami, veterinary care is not viewed as important. Language and cultural barriers get in the way,” Garcia said. “I think I can be the person to break down those barriers.”
While a senior at Penn State, Daniel Adams was in a physiology lab, performing a spay on a rat to learn about the endocrine system, when he realized he loved surgery.

“I was describing the lab to my brother and he asked me, ‘What if you did that on a dog or a cat?’” recalled Adams, now in his second year at Penn Vet. “I was going down the medical school route, but that’s when it all seemed to come together. My love for animals and medicine could be combined into one awesome profession.”

Adams had experience working with animals as a summer intern at the Philadelphia Zoo, helping the trainers and veterinarians. It was mostly a husbandry job, feeding and cleaning up after the animals, as well as giving educational talks to the public.

“The guy with the bird on his arm in the walkways, that was me,” said Adams. “Interacting with and teaching the public about the animals under my care was my favorite part of the job.”

When applying to veterinary school, Penn was first on the list, he said, because of its great reputation and the proximity to family. Adams grew up in Philly, first in the Mayfair section of the Northeast, and then in Bucks County, where the family lives with a yellow Lab named Buddy.

Adams is a Penn Vet Opportunity Scholar, which not only gave him financial assistance, but also paired him with a mentor, Dr. Peter Herman, V’69, of Providence Animal Hospital in Chester, Pennsylvania.

“Dr. Herman has been really helpful,” Adams said. “If I have questions about anything, he is there to answer and offer guidance. I’ve been out to his practice to help out and gain more experience.”

Adams’ experience there has ranged from routine wellness visits, to scrubbing in for orthopedic surgery.

Adams would like to become a small animal surgeon himself, in part because of his experience last summer with Darwin Animal Doctors. He worked in the Galapagos Islands, specifically Santa Cruz, performing spay and neuter surgery on cats and dogs. Darwin Animal Doctors has been crucial for population control of stray animals on the island, helping to preserve the delicate ecosystem of the national park.

Adams had studied parasites in rabbits at Penn State. While in the Galapagos, he studied tick-borne parasites in dogs. Currently, he is assisting Dr. James “Sparky” Lok with his work on intestinal parasites in dogs. Adams hopes to continue broadening his research experience in an internship this summer.

Adams also volunteers at the Delaware County SPCA once a month to perform various surgeries such as spays, neuters, hernia repairs, and mass removals. “It’s a really good way to get hands-on experience and practice what we learn in the classroom,” he said. He works with Penn Vet alum Dr. Kimberly Boudwin, the SPCA’s Director of Shelter Medicine.

Adams is on the Penn Vet Admissions Committee and in the veterinary fraternity Alpha Psi, which recently supported New Leash on Life—a nonprofit organization that pulls dogs out of kill shelters to have them trained by prison inmates, in an attempt to assimilate both back into society.

He’s also part of the Christian Veterinary Fellowship, a group of about 30 students who meet twice a week to pray and talk about their faith. “It helps with the pressure of school,” he said. “It keeps my head on straight and helps keep me focused on what’s important.”

Although he’s not sure where he will go with his veterinary career, Adams is happy where he is now, at age 24.

“I love this place,” he said. “I feel really at home at this school and I’m extremely lucky to be here.”
Aquaponics drew Meghana Pendurthi into the world of One Health, directing her veterinary career toward improving the health of animals, humans, and the environment.

“One Health combines my interests of veterinary medicine and serving the greater good,” said Pendurthi, 25, whose long-term goal is to work on national policy and legislation. “Veterinarians have so many essential roles beyond providing care for pets.”

Now in her third year at Penn Vet, Pendurthi was one of five students to win Penn Vet’s Student Inspiration Award, earning $25,000 for a project to advance the frontiers of veterinary medicine.

Pendurthi and her classmate, Ashley Cherry, are using the award to develop and install a commercial aquaponics system at the W.B. Saul High School of Agricultural Sciences in Philadelphia to teach students about sustainable agriculture in urban spaces.

Their Penn Aquaponics Project combines the farming of tilapia fish with hydroponics-based agriculture. The pair also co-founded the Penn Aquaponics Club, which hosts a series of lectures and wet labs about aquatic veterinary medicine.

“A lot of people depend on fish stocks, and the oceans are being depleted. U.S. aquaculture is an area with huge potential for growth.”

Growing up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Pendurthi always had an affinity for animals. “When I go back and look through elementary school yearbooks, I always said I wanted to be a veterinarian or marine biologist,” she said. Medicine also was an interest, cultivated by her father, a surgical oncologist.

Undergraduate school took her to the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned a degree in molecular environmental biology. Her senior thesis focused on using genetic markers to help solve an inbreeding puzzle in elephant populations.

While at Berkeley she also researched the dwarf cuttlefish, specifically camouflage and learning behaviors, as well as individual striping patterns in octopuses. The summer after graduation in 2012, she worked at the Mystic Aquarium Seal Rescue Clinic in Connecticut, providing veterinary and husbandry care for seal pups.

She chose Penn Vet partly because of its location in Philadelphia, and also because of the School’s emphasis on One Health.

Pendurthi learned about aquaponics during AQUAVET, an aquatic medicine course in the summer of 2014, which Cherry also attended. “We talked a lot about the issue of food security with the growing human population,” Pendurthi said, adding, “There is increased demand for meat and dairy products, specifically lean protein sources like fish.”

Aquaponics combines aquaculture (fish farming) with hydroponics (growing plants with just water). The fish produce waste in the form of ammonia, and microbes convert it to usable nitrogen, which feed the plant bed system. Then the filtered water is cycled back to the fish tank.

“The aquaponics system reduces water usage, reduces the need for soil, and reduces the space needed to grow plants,” she said. “It is a cool model for urban, sustainable agriculture.”

Pendurthi and Cherry are working with the Saul students to set up an aquaponics system that includes a 500-gallon fish tank, which will support 64 feet of grow-bed space. The system can grow 25 heads of lettuce per week and 100 pounds of fish in eight months. The students will sell the products through a Community Supported Agriculture group.

Pendurthi ultimately wants to use her veterinary expertise to impact national legislation, perhaps on water quality or the use of aquaculture.

Last summer, she worked on poultry regulations for the state of Tennessee and participated in a USDA program about transboundary diseases. Pendurthi is also the liaison between Penn Vet students and the national American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), and serves on the student executive board.

These experiences, she hopes, will help pave the way to a career in Washington, D.C. “I am really interested in using legislation to drive animal, human, and environmental health,” she said.
Home from college for Thanksgiving, Caitlin Moore decided to make her beloved pony a special holiday treat of bran mash, carrots, and apples. Lady Luck ate too fast, and choked. Moore called every veterinarian in the area that morning. None returned her calls.

A biology major in her junior year at the University of Maryland, Moore was interested in medicine, but was uncertain about whether she should pursue the human or veterinary field.

“That was the day I decided to pursue veterinary medicine for sure,” said Moore, now in her fourth year at Penn Vet. “In that moment I thought, ‘I am never going to do this to someone.’ No matter what, I’m going to be there for my clients.”

Lady Luck was true to her name and managed to hang on, coughing all day until a vet came to the farm that night. The vet passed a nasogastric tube and poured mineral oil down the pony’s esophagus to dislodge the obstruction.

“I’m seeing the other side now that I’m in vet school. I understand clients will call you at any hour, and every time they call it may not be essential,” Moore continued. “But I just remember feeling so helpless that day.”

Growing up in Carroll County, Maryland, on a farm owned by her family for generations, Moore had always worked with animals. She started riding at eight years old and wanted a pony “more than anything else.” Her parents said she would have to earn the money for that pony. So she did, raising market lambs in 4-H and selling them at the county fair.

Moore bought the mare, a bay Exmoor-Dartmoor cross, at auction, with the $1,000 she earned from the lambs. And she developed a deep devotion to her “forever pony,” which she still has today on the family farm, along with her off-the-track Thoroughbred jumper, Rocinante.

Moore shadowed vets in high school, riding along on the weekends. A volunteer with Carroll County Therapeutic Riding Program, she worked with kids, parents, and horses. She even visited Penn Vet, and caught a glimpse of the famous patient, racehorse Barbaro.

But she was “dead set against Penn” when considering vet schools, applying only because her mother insisted. “I was a country girl who didn’t want to live in Philadelphia,” she said.

On the day of her interview she toured New Bolton Center with Dr. Eric Parente. “By the end of the day I knew this is where I wanted to be,” she said. “It was a sense of belonging I had not had in any other place.”

Following her acceptance to Penn, she was awarded an Opportunity Scholarship, which provided financial aid and also paired her with mentor Dr. Patricia Sertich, V’83, Associate Professor of Reproduction at New Bolton Center.

After Moore’s first year in vet school, Sertich arranged for her to volunteer at the Brandywine Polo Club and to collaborate on a research project with Internal Medicine’s Dr. Rose Nolen-Walston.

The project researched how clenbuterol affects muscle mass in the horse. Moore administered clenbuterol to the polo ponies, and measured the fat on their rumps using ultrasound to assess their change in percent body fat. The data culminated in a publication in the American Journal of Veterinary Research and presentation of the project at a national conference.

“Dr. Sertich has set me up for success,” Moore said. “She’s been amazing.”

One of her favorite nights of vet school was at New Bolton Center on March 29, 2014, when mare My Special Girl gave birth to the colt, Boone, with the world watching on the live feed from Penn Vet’s Foal Cam.

“I can’t believe I got so lucky,” she said. “My parents were watching on the Foal Cam. We were doing our nightly checks and I told Dr. Emily Setlakwe, ‘I think she is in stage one,’ and sure enough, she was.”

Encouraged by Sertich, Moore spent summer 2014 at Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital in Kentucky for the vet-shadowing program. Following graduation this spring, Moore will work as a rotating intern at Mid-Atlantic Equine Medical Center in Ringoes, New Jersey. “It was again one of these things that felt so right. I knew I didn’t want to be anywhere else,” she said.

Moore said she envisions a career in equine internal medicine. “Most people don’t get to say they can do their dream job, and I do,” she said.