A Will to Live

by Ursula Wagener and Marvin Lazerson

On January 2, 1995, VHUP's Dr. Dottie Brown saved our cat Rexina's life. Rex had fallen from an icy tree, severing her spinal column. Dr. Brown managed to fuse the column, although the spinal cord itself was severely damaged, resulting in hind leg paralysis.

We were devastated by Rexina's paralysis, but determined to help her live as fully as possible. We learned to express her bladder two to three times daily, able to do so with a minimum of fuss and even some humor. Using a sling under her belly, we learned to walk her around the neighborhood, sometimes for up to an hour as she explored her old haunts. Rex's determination and will to live inspired us. She learned to crawl, using only her front legs, leaping off beds and down stairs whenever she felt like it.

Over the next six years, our family and friends wondered about this strange couple who insisted on caring for their physically challenged cat, while we reshaped our schedules to accommodate Rex's needs. Often uncomfortable in Rexina's handicapped presence, their presumption was that Rex was lucky to have us.

What we discovered was how lucky we were to have Rex. She helped us discover a group of wonderful animal lovers who lived in our house and shared in Rex's care when we had to be away.

She also taught us how to respond to adversity, remaining as feisty during the years of disability as she had always been on four legs. She demanded food when she wanted it, crawled to the door when she thought it was time to go out-and kept us out exploring as long as the mood hit her. Just as she had before the injury, she hissed and swiped with her claws when she did not want to be bothered and continued to terrorize the veterinarians and staff at the Chestnut Hill Cat Clinic.

Most of all Rex taught us to give love unconditionally, teaching us a love unconstrained by the contractual arrangements and negotiations that so shape human relationships. Rex was never going to "get better." She was never going to be anybody else's idea of the right cat. She challenged us to throw away old rules about when to "put the animal down," a euphemism we came to hate.

Rexina gave us more than we could have ever imagined, an enthusiasm for living and giving, an optimism about the possibilities of each day, a joy in making every event a celebration and an ode to life. We loved her immeasurably, but the love she gave us in return was just as great.

At age 14, Rex died on August 4, 2000 in the small animal clinic at the University of Munich, Germany. A large abdominal hernia required surgery and she never recovered from it. She was a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence — the cat who taught us about courage and how to live life more fully.

---

behavior. Studies using rodents at Monell and elsewhere have revealed prominent genetically-based strain differences in taste sensitivity, and it is likely that such differences also exist in dogs and cats. Increasing knowledge of differences in taste sensitivity and the effects of taste mixtures on perception may help manufacturers come up with palatable foods that can be readily accepted by particular breeds. Genetically-determined differences in susceptibility to diet-induced obesity have been described in laboratory species and are most likely present in pet animals. In fact, obesity is currently the most common nutritional disease affecting dogs (and cats), with some breeds, such as Labrador retriever, terrier, spaniel, dachshund, basset hound, and beagle, among the most commonly affected.

Food and flavor preferences in humans are determined in large part by experience, and experience also influences the food preferences of pets. Our ability to understand our companion animals and the unique worlds they live in will increase as scientists continue to explore and decipher the chemical senses.

Do species and strain differences — or aging — influence how chemosensory-mediated cephalic reflexes affect food metabolism and digestive function of pets?

Dr. Stein is a Senior Research Associate at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, where she edits Monell's newsletter, The Monell Connection. *This article is reprinted from the publication.*

The Monell Center is a nonprofit basic research institute dedicated exclusively to the study of taste, smell, and chemosensory irritation. Researchers at Monell work with scientists from government, industry and academia to explore the chemical senses at at every level, from molecular to behavioral. Dr. Stein's current research explores the role of experience in the development of taste preferences in children and adults.