

A woman's work

More women are joining in veterinary medicine



Dr. Karen Fling, right, checks Dixie, a Yorkshire terrier, with the help of a registered veterinary technician Worden, center, while Sophie sticks close to owner Carol Duff, left, at East Lake Veterinary Hospital in Dallas. CHERYL DIAZ • KRT CAMPUS

By Kristen Kauffman
KRT CAMPUS

DALLAS — When Karen Fling was a high school student in the late 1970s, she worked for a Dallas veterinarian cleaning cages for an hourly wage. She had dreamed of becoming a vet since the second grade, after being encouraged by a veterinary nurse who helped care for her family's pet beagle, Lady.

She remembers looking at the doctor's diplomas and photos on the wall as she worked.

"There were only two or three faces of women in the class pictures," she says.

Today, in Fling's East Lake Veterinary Hospital, a dramatically different class picture hangs on the wall. By the time Fling graduated from Texas A&M's College of Veterinary Medicine in 1987, she says, close to half the students were women.

In 2003, A&M reports that about 80 percent of its vet school graduates are women. The national average is about 70 percent.

In a reflection of the trend toward more female veterinarians, Bonnie Beaver, a nationally noted animal behaviorist and Texas A&M professor of small animal medicine and surgery, was elected 2004 president of the American Veterinary Medical Association last summer. She is only the second woman ever to fill the post for the 140-year-old organization, which represents nearly 70,000 U.S. vets, almost half of whom are women.

But in 1970, Beaver, a graduate of the University of Minnesota's veterinary school, was one of just two women in her class, and one of 500 female veterinarians nationwide.

As far back as she can remember, as a little girl in rural western Minnesota near Maple Plain, she wanted to be a veterinarian. The fact that there were almost no other women in the field didn't even occur to her, she says.

Like many women entering nontraditional professions during that time, she faced gender discrimination — not so much from clients, she says, but from other veterinarians.

"I didn't let it bother me. I wanted to be a veterinarian and had the grades to get in, and I had a job to do when I graduated," she says. "I was offered significantly less pay for some jobs than my male colleagues — that happened several times — and in fact I was told by one that a colleague was getting more because he was married and had a family."

Beaver, who once served as president of the Women's Veterinary Association, a national organization focused on helping women become integrated into the profession, says veterinary medicine is now gender-blind.

"The AVMA represents 87 percent of all veterinarians, and because of that it has to address concerns of women in the profession just as it has to address concerns of men in the profession," says Beaver. "They are about how to give the best possible service to our patients and clients."

Texas A&M graduated its first female vet in 1966, and more in 1967. Stacy Lackey, who owns Casa Linda Animal Clinic in Dallas, remembers studying alongside the university's first female veterinary students. He recalls some animosity toward them.

"Anytime there's a change there's always someone who says, 'Let's not change,'" Lackey says. "All of us were trying to struggle through ourselves."

He is now the only one among the four vets in his practice.

"It just evolved. There's never any move toward bringing them in" on a gender basis, Lackey says.

While the gender shift in veterinary medicine is obvious, clear is why.

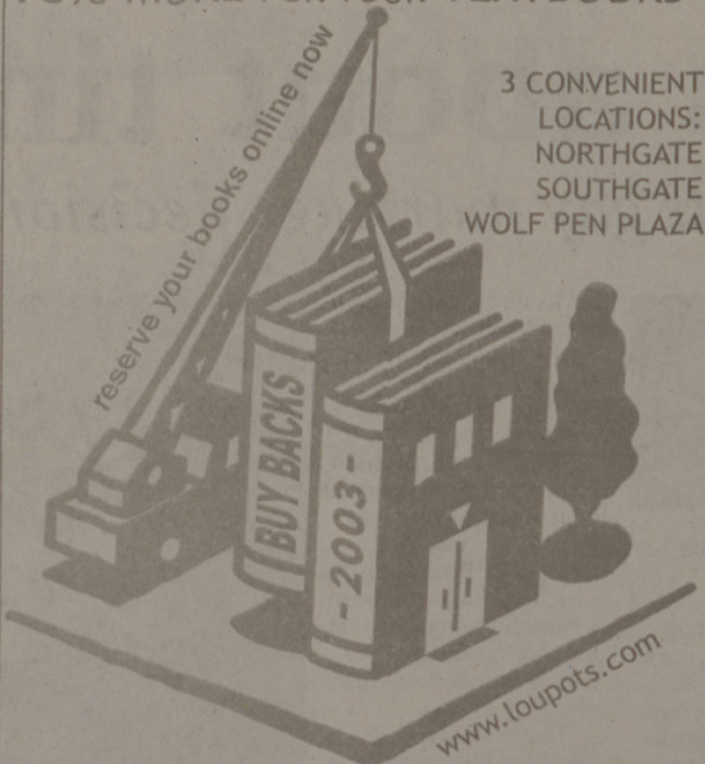
"We see more women in science, we see more women in engineering," says Beaver. "I can't explain that disparity in veterinary medicine."

One reason may be sex demographics. No longer is a typical vet found practicing the farm, but in a small-town clinic in a city or town. Of the percent of vets treating small animals exclusively, almost half are women, whereas more than 80 percent of large-animal veterinarians are men, according to the AVMA.

Beaver and Fling suggest the lifestyle of a small-animal vet may be more attractive to women.

Fling's practice includes veterinarians — five full-time, one part-time — all of whom happen to be women.

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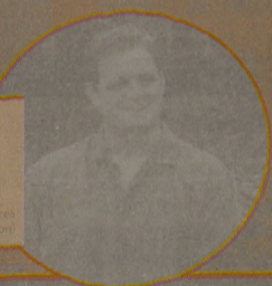
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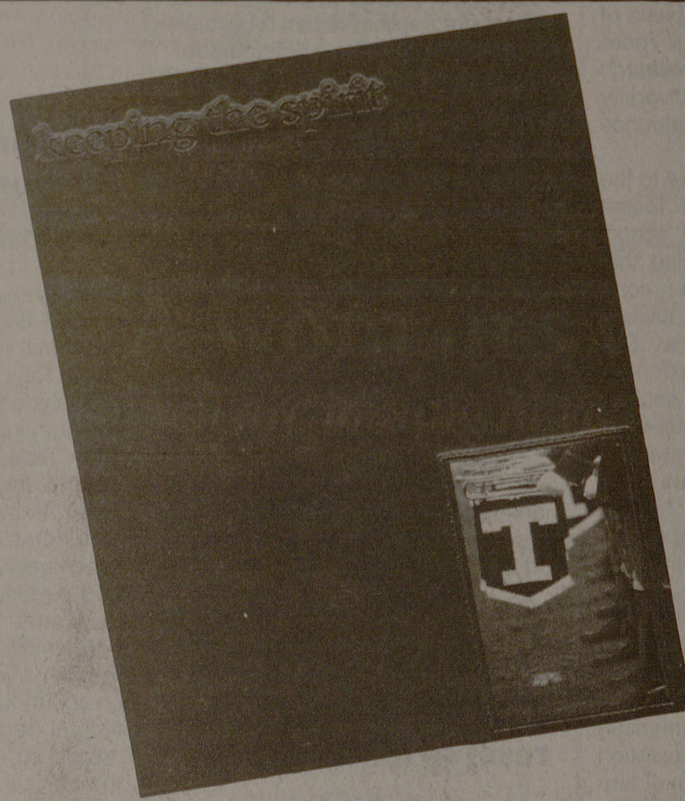
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