

People Power

BY ALEXANDRA KLEINKOPF

Philip Bushby

The Road Less Traveled: Philip A. Bushby, D.V.M., is not your typical professor—but then again, he’s not your typical vet either. Though he teaches at the Mississippi State University (MSU) College of Veterinary Medicine, the man is rarely on campus. Instead, he is on the road three to six days a week, carrying out his life’s work and passion.

“My commitment is to changing the veterinary profession’s attitudes toward animal welfare,” he explains.

Though Bushby began his career conventionally—graduating from vet college, doing an internship, performing two residencies, opening a private practice, and finally becoming a board-certified vet surgeon—he became increasingly concerned about his peers’ approach to animal welfare beyond the business of medicine.

“In my four years of veterinary school, from 1968 to 1972, I don’t remember the phrase ‘animal shelter’ mentioned even once,” says Bushby, “so it doesn’t really surprise me that a lot of veterinarians of my generation are really unaware, uninformed, and uninvolved in the problems associated with pet overpopulation.” This became painfully evident to him in Mississippi, where, he says, 75 percent of the animals admitted to shelters die there—some from disease, but most from euthanasia for space.

Bushby had found his calling in spay/neuter and shelter medicine.

Love and a Question: “What we see is a veterinary profession that’s able to provide better and better and better care to the animals of fewer and fewer and fewer people, because the rest can’t afford the care,” says Bushby. “So the question becomes, ‘What happens to the rest?’”

He set out to answer that question with help from The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), which bestowed MSU’s veterinary school with a \$900,000 grant in January 2006 to create a Mississippi-based Rural Area Veterinary Services program, expand shelter activities, and provide education on



Philip Bushby assists a junior veterinary student performing a spay operation.

animal welfare issues. Bushby committed to perform at least 3,000 spay/neuter surgeries per year; the program had already exceeded its two-year goal by 82 surgeries at the 17-month mark. “These numbers pale in comparison with other high-volume spay/neuter programs,” says Bushby, “but the significant feature of our program is that most of the surgeries are done by junior and senior veterinary students.”

With a voucher program in place, more local vets became involved in affordable spay/neuter surgery. Bushby says the response from the public was astounding: People brought in upward of 12 dogs or 60 cats at a time for sterilization.

The Star-Splitter: But according to Bushby, the goal is bigger than spay and neuter. He works closely with the Social Science Research Center on campus to change attitudes in communities to create long-term, self-supporting systems designed to carry the load when the grant money runs out.

“I know that I could never ever spay and neuter enough animals to really make a difference,” he says. “I could never provide enough free or low-cost veterinary care to ever make a difference. I could never rescue enough animals from abusive situations to make a difference ... but I know that my graduates can.”

The passion Bushby has for educating students about the importance of high-quality, high-volume spay/neuter techniques and addressing the realities of overpopulation is contagious. In his wildly popular shelter program elective, he and his students make an average of 12 shelter trips per month, performing about 26 surgeries per day. For 15 years, Bushby’s students have manned the forceps, while the doctor merely assists,

giving them prime hands-on experience. Bushby isn’t just a star—he’s creating them.

Miles to Go Before He Sleeps: Bushby is the first to acknowledge his obstacles: “Veterinarians are afraid of low-cost veterinary clinics,” he says. “They’re afraid of high-quality, high-volume spay/neuter clinics, because they fear that they’re going to take business away. [But] I think it’s becoming easier and easier and easier to convince them that the people who take their animals to those systems ... aren’t going to bring their animals to [full-priced vets] anyway.”

After spending nearly a year talking to private practitioners and local vet associations about the grant and how it would actually help their practices, Bushby has gained almost universal veterinary support. Now he is trying to win the understanding of locals. “The humane education component of this program is probably more important than the spay/neuter component,” he says. “The shelters are absolutely not the issue. The people in the shelters are doing everything they can in a completely impossible situation, understaffed, underfunded, trying to clean up a mess that they didn’t create. The mess is created by people’s attitudes.”

Despite how far Bushby’s grassroots initiative has come—from taking the path less chosen to rallying the support of his peers, from inspiring students to saving lives through pilot programs, one thing remains clear to him: “We got a lot of work to do.”



It takes a lot of work—but oh, the rewards!