Hutchins Gift to Veterinary Medicine Benefits Human-Animal Bond Program

Gift helps donor’s two personal loves of social work and her animal companions.

Self-described as an “animal nut,” Mary Jane “M.J.” Hutchins (B.S., social work, 1961) of Columbus, Ohio, has pledged to endow a stipend to Ohio State’s College of Social Work to provide a paid field experience to a graduate-level Social Work student intern in the College of Veterinary Medicine’s Human-Animal Bond-Centered Education and Practice Program (BCEPP).

This gift is especially meaningful because paid internships in the College of Social Work are rare.

Hutchins is passionate about this program because it’s a marriage of her two great personal loves of social work and her animal companions. She is also planning to provide the program with in-kind gifts, including furniture and a stereo system, for the veterinary hospital’s “comfort rooms”—where family members can go with their pets or veterinary staff to discuss difficult decisions or to have private time.

“The immediate goal of the program is to help people through a difficult time and then hopefully expand into more pet educational areas,” Hutchins said. “A lot of people who are involved with pets may be more sensitive than those who are not. I believe animals bring out the soft side of the world. They even offer health benefits to heart patients, those with Alzheimer’s, and others.”

Hutchins points out that, when a family member passes away, there are many details to oversee. “But a pet passing lets you cope immediately with the emotional side of the loss,” she said. “You can’t replace people and you can’t replace pets.”

According to Jennifer Brandt, Ph.D., L.I.S.W., who heads up the BCEPP, “M.J.’s gift will be a tremendous asset in terms of our need for people because it will pay a stipend to a student majoring in social work. This person will understand the importance of combining social work skills with the field of veterinary medicine.”

Such a multidisciplinary approach is viewed by Brandt as a positive step forward in veterinary medicine. For the future, she would like to see the program expand to include additional staff, a wider curriculum, and more opportunities for students.

“Learning is not a finite process. It’s a mistake to focus just on the students. I think we need to have more intensive training for interns,
residents, and faculty. And beyond that,” Brandt said, “I’d like to see more continuing educational opportunities available for veterinarians, as well as greater community outreach and seminars. This will require adding staff to compose multi-disciplinary teams that will work together to teach this material.”

Hutchins’ brother, Butch O’Neill, is also a graduate of Ohio State’s College of Social Work, having earned his degree in 1957. Although he geared his career toward business, Hutchins said she considers social work a solid background for any professional discipline.