

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Against All Odds: An Interview with Rachel Cezar, DVM

Editor's Note: In my role as a board member of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI), I have the honor working with Dr. Rachel Cezar, the USDA/APHIS National Horse Protection Coordinator, who is responsible for enforcing the Horse Protection Act. An impressive early career veterinarian, Dr. Cezar is a woman of color whose path to veterinary medicine has many parallels to the experiences of non-minority women who entered the profession 50 years ago. During a half-day WLVDI program at the AVMA in Denver chaired by my colleague, Ms. Julie Kumble, Dr. Cezar provided a powerful testimonial of her experiences from early childhood to today. We were so impressed by her story and so confident that it could have an impact on other young veterinarians, that Julie did a follow-up interview, the results of which are presented here.

A 2002 DVM graduate from Michigan State College of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Cezar interned at the Dubai Equine Hospital in the United Arab Emirates and joined the Horse Protection Program in 2007, initially as USDA Veterinary Medical Officer and Wild Horse and Burro Compliance Officer in Michigan. Dr. Cezar is a member of the Air National Guard for 113th Wing at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, DC, as a Public Health Officer.

Donald F. Smith

By Julie Kumble (Guest Author and Interviewer)

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Ms. Julie Kumble: *You have had a career of educational "firsts" throughout your life. Have you had a personal mantra or quote that has helped you blaze your own trail?*

Dr. Rachel Cezar: I was raised in a small rural town in Michigan with parents who traditionally believed that when you graduate high school you get a good job, get married and have kids. I did not take this route when I graduated and told my parents I was going to school to be a vet. When they discovered that it would take eight years to accomplish that, they did not accept the path and, along with my siblings and peers, pushed back on my passion and path. This may sound unfortunate; however, it was fortunate because if I did not deal with this situation at the time, I would not have been able to handle the future challenges that I would later encounter, being a petite woman of color and wishing to only work with large animals, and then take on enforcement of horse welfare for the country.



Dr. Rachel Cezar, 2014
(Photo provided by Dr. Cezar)

Therefore, my personal quote that I live by is “against all odds,” because there will be times that people, even your family, don't believe in your dreams and passion. However, you need to continue to push through those hardships and take it as lessons learned so you can keep thriving in the beloved career and path you have chosen.

Kumble: *What has given you the inner strength and the external support to, not only survive, but to thrive as an emerging leader in the profession? What critical lessons have you learned that you can pass on to those that would follow you?*

Cezar: One major lesson I have learned is to never sweat the small OR big things. In the end, everything works out for the best. Upon two years into my current position as a major leader of the National Horse Protection Program, I was diagnosed with a debilitating disease. However, I did not take it as a debilitating issue; it was an uplifting issue and woke me up to not letting anything get to me and making sure to take time for myself. Dealing with animal welfare is very high-profile, and anything and everything with the program needed an explanation to Congress immediately. I was always under the radar enduring many threats and false accusations, and dedicated all my time and energy to keep the program moving forward. However, it began to take a toll on me physically and personally. Fortunately, I was able to continue moving this program forward and decrease the abuse of these horses as well as keep my sanity by not sweating the small and big things anymore.

Kumble: *What type of person have you sought to be your mentor(s), and why?*

Cezar: Most of my mentors have been basically anyone who has been willing to offer help to me. There are many leaders in this world; however, it is those who take the time to lend a hand or have a conversation with you about your growth that truly have risen in my eyes as true selfless inspirational leaders. Also, I have realized that you don't have to just have one mentor or ask someone to be your mentor before they begin to open that door of mentorship.

Kumble: *What type of person do you feel you can best be a mentor towards, and how do you reach out to them?*

Cezar: I believe I have been a great mentor to anyone who is a first generation college student. With my experiences, I feel that I can relate with someone who has struggles from their family and peers to keep moving forward in their career goal. I also feel I have been a great mentor to early career veterinarians who are interested in government/regulatory veterinary medicine. I started very early in this sector of veterinary medicine and was informed many times I needed to be more clinically- seasoned to be in certain positions; however, I was able to prove them wrong and continue my career path forward.

One of the ways I mentor and give back to the profession is by volunteering at my alma mater, Michigan State University, in their summer program for college students. The program is known as the MSU College of Veterinary Medicine Vetward Bound Program. The program especially targets first generational college students who are interested in veterinary medicine and are educationally, economically, and/or culturally disadvantaged. I tell those students who think that they could never take out the kinds of loans needed for vet school that, yes, they can and they can pay them back. I tell them that there are many opportunities outside working in a clinic that can support their financial goals and have a nice lifestyle while working in this profession.

Kumble: *There are important conversations about increasing diversity in the profession. At least until recently, most would agree that there has been more emphasis on African-Americans in veterinary medicine than Hispanic-Americans. At the same time, the national data would suggest that the number of Hispanic-American veterinary students is growing actively, and throughout the country. As a woman of color, could you comment on your perspective on the future of minority groups including Latinos and how they fill some unique niches in veterinary medicine here in the US and internationally that may not be as natural a fit for veterinarians from other racial or ethnic backgrounds.*

Cezar: Overall, I do believe our profession as a whole is suffering economically because we have not embraced diversity as a whole nor moved towards recruiting individuals that will represent the American society as it is now. The inclusion of more people of color broadens the profession to represent our society, and that will potentially increase access to health care for pets by clients who will feel more comfortable looking for specific kinds of providers from their own background. Having more diversity potentially can also increase access to animal health in various parts of the world, especially the developing world.

Also, it is not only diversity of culture and ethnicity that is necessary for our profession to thrive, it is also diversity of fields that are available in veterinary medicine that should be embraced. Many have the assumption that a veterinarian is someone that works in a hospital or clinical setting. Veterinary medicine represents so many facets that help our nation continue to thrive...military, government, research, academia, and even Congress. I am glad that I am part of the initiative to have women more involved in veterinary leadership. I believe this is the beginning pathway for our veterinary leadership to begin embracing diversity as a whole and I look forward to the future and supporting the venues to enhance diversity in our profession.

Kumble: *Though you graduated 12 years ago, you only joined the AVMA three years ago. There must be a story there. If it is relevant, could you please share it?*

Cezar: Like many students after graduation, I needed to be frugal about my bills, so after veterinary school and fulfilling a fellowship, internship and proceeding forward to government/regulatory veterinary medicine—none of which covered membership to AVMA—I felt it was best to not be a member anymore. However, during my current position in the National Horse Protection Program, I was fortunate to engage with the Animal Welfare Committee of AVMA and the Executive Board. I then realized how important our veterinary organizations were to us as whole to support the veterinary community. I realized that the AVMA is the voice of the profession and will be there for us when we want to make an impact in our specific areas of concern and as a whole. Right now the demographics of the HOD and Executive Board don't reflect the profession, but it can change and I want to be involved so I can be part of the change that needs to happen. That's why I began to get involved in AAEP and AVMA—so I can begin to be a part of the future for our veterinary community.

Kumble: *At the AVMA convention, you were on a panel with Dr. Valerie Ragan, Director of the Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine at Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, and Dr. Eleanor Green, the Carl B. King Dean of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A&M University, as part of a symposium with the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative. You talked about the idea of having it all but not just all at once, and the importance of pacing your goals as well as dealing with stress. Can you elaborate on the lessons you've learned?*

Cezar: I commented earlier about giving your complete self to your career and not thinking about your personal self. I realized how important it is to have a balanced life a few years into my current position because the stress began to wear my body down. Many of my peers and family have believed I would only be dedicated to my career forever and never have a relationship or family of my own, because also I have continued to take care of my immediate family. So I began to have this same assumption of myself and wrote off that I would never be in a relationship or have a family of my own.

However, I always remember what my parents told me that good things come to those who wait. Fortunately, I have been blessed and am now able to continue with my career in protecting horses and begin a relationship and have my own family.

Kumble: *What would be your dream position when you celebrate your 20th reunion from MSU?*

Cezar: I feel as though I do have my dream position now; however, I would like to expand my support in our veterinary community and become more involved in organized veterinary medicine. I believe this would be the best thing to inspire others to get more involved and be the moving force to have veterinary medicine be seen as the most uplifting and growing career field for everyone in this country.

KEYWORDS:

Rachel Cezar
Minorities
History of Veterinary Medicine
USDA/APHIS
Horse Protection Program
Michigan State University

TOPIC:

Diversity in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

How can veterinarians of color help encourage more under-represented minorities to follow in their path?

META-SUMMARY:

A successful woman of color reflects upon the struggles of becoming a veterinarian.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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