

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# A Tuskegee Graduate to Lead the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association

By Dr. Donald F. Smith, with assistance from Julie Kumble  
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The municipalities of Bloomfield and Windsor are located in north central Connecticut between Granby to the north and Hartford and West Hartford to the south. Against the advice of others, it was in this community that Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne opened a new veterinary clinic in 1992.<sup>1</sup> “Well-meaning friends and colleagues warned me that Bloomfield-Windsor residents could not support a new veterinary clinic,” she said.<sup>2</sup> But Dr. Dennis had done her homework and opened a hospital in what was referred to as a new American City, an integrated city where people of different race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation could come to an animal hospital and know that their pets would be cared for without judgment.



*Bloomfield Animal Hospital*

(Photo provided by Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne 2014)

Dr. Dennis grew up in Connecticut, the oldest of three girls, raised by a single mother who taught her to be industrious and self-sufficient. At the age of 17 she went off to Cornell, but the racial tension she found there in the early 1970s proved too much for this young African-American woman, and after one year she transferred to the University of Connecticut where she continued to pursue her undergraduate degree.

Andrea had wanted to be veterinarian since childhood, but her advisor at U Conn told her, “You’ll never be a veterinarian.” Undaunted, she switched advisors, applied as a junior and started veterinary college in 1978. She almost didn’t accept the offer from Tuskegee — “George Wallace was governor, I can’t go there,” she said—but her advisor encouraged her, telling her to just go and she’d be fine in Alabama. He insisted that she would fulfill her dream of becoming a veterinarian and, by matriculating as a junior, would even save a year of college and tuition.

“One person believed in me,” Dr. Dennis recalls sentimentally. *“One person believed in me.”*

She had a wonderful time in Tuskegee. “It was a small school. The Dean, Walter Bowie,<sup>3</sup> was great, and everyone was a mentor. Everyone had my back.”

After graduation, Dr. Dennis completed an internship in large animal medicine and surgery at the University of California, Davis, then taught for a year at the newly-opened Ross School of Veterinary Medicine. Ross was still located on the island of Dominica when she started, and she actually experienced the move to the island of St. Kitts.

But after the year, she decided to go into practice back in the Northeast and, for the next eight years, worked in two small animal practices. While she learned a great deal observing how these owners ran their practices, she yearned to start her own business.

*I wanted to do it my own way. It is so satisfying when you know that you are the owner. You don’t have to introduce yourself as the owner, but you just have that internal satisfaction and pride of being in that position. You get to mentor pre-veterinary students and see them go off to veterinary college and you know you have had an impact on their lives.*

*I also wanted to manage employees in a different manner than I had observed in my past. With so many employees, whether veterinarians or technicians or office staff, being women committed to raising families, you need to accommodate that with support, not hostility. When you treat people well, that kindness will be returned. At least that’s how I think it is.*

*Sure, borrowing money to start a practice can be daunting. But just like student loans where you work to pay them back, you also are out there earning money from your practice. So, if you are a wise investor and manage your practice well, you can pay back those loans and have the satisfaction of owning your own practice.*

So in 1992, she started out on her own. Using a house that she co-owned with her mother as collateral, she borrowed \$100,000 from the bank and filled her Bloomfield Animal Hospital with a combination of a wonderful array of used equipment that was given to her by the local hospital, and new purchases. Even in her first year, the business was above expectations and she has never looked back. In 1997, she was joined by an associate, Dr. Eva Ceranowicz,<sup>4</sup> and together they continue to have a thriving practice with a diverse and supportive clientele.



*Drs. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne and Eva Ceranowicz, Bloomfield Animal Hospital*  
(Photo provided by Dr. Dennis-LaVigne, 2014)

The hospital is somewhat of a family operation. Andrea's husband, Randy LaVigne, a former professional baseball player, is her business manager; their 20-year-old son, Justin, (now a freshman at University of Connecticut) is production assistant of the popular Pet Talk<sup>5</sup> show that Dr. Dennis hosts. Andrea's sister, Lynn, works as an animal care technician, and even her mother volunteered as receptionist when the practice first opened.

Dr. Dennis is passionate about giving back and supporting her community. She has held many leadership positions at her undergraduate alma mater, the University of Connecticut, and serves on its Board of Trustees.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, she gave the commencement address for the university in front of some 8,000 graduates, family members, and friends.

A firm believer in organized veterinary medicine, Dr. Dennis-LaVigne will become the sixth woman president, since 2000, of the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association.<sup>7</sup> But with a twist: just as she was the first woman African-American veterinarian in Connecticut (at least in the modern era), she will also be the first African-American president of the association.



*Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne giving advice regarding animal care on her Pet Talk Show*  
(Photo provided by Dr. Dennis-LaVigne, 2014)



*Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne with Jack*  
(Photo provided by Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne, 2014)

As it relates to leadership in organized veterinary medicine Tuskegee University graduates have been on a bit of a roll the last few years. In addition to Dr. Dennis-Lavigne, Dr. Linda Jacobson,

DVM 1971, served as president of the New York State Veterinary Medical Association two years ago. Dr. Ted Cohn, DVM 1975, will be inaugurated as AVMA president this summer in Denver.

Dr. Smith thanks Ms. Julie Kumble, Director of Grants and Programs, Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, Easthampton, MA 01027, for her contributions to this story. She can be reached at [juliek@womensfund.net](mailto:juliek@womensfund.net).

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<sup>1</sup> [Bloomfield Animal Hospital](#), Bloomfield, Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis-LaVigne, Andrea (DVM, Tuskegee, 1982; Owner Bloomfield Animal Hospital, CT). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) and Julie Kumble (Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts), January 28, 2014. Unless otherwise attributed, quotations and information throughout this story were from this interview.

<sup>3</sup> Walter C. Bowie, DVM, PhD, was the third dean at Tuskegee, serving in that position from 1972-1990. He passed in 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Ceranowicz, Eva (DVM, University of Wisconsin, 1990), past president of the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association, and recipient of the 2013 Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association Veterinarian of the Year Award.

<sup>5</sup> [Pet Talk](#). CBS Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Dennis-LaVigne served as an alumni-elected member of the University of Connecticut board of trustees for two four-year terms (2003-2011). Last year, she was reappointed by the governor of Connecticut to serve an additional six-year term on the Board. She is currently chair of the Academic Affairs Committee.

<sup>7</sup> Flynn, Simon (Executive Director of the CVMA). Telephone conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), January 20, 2014.

#### KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine  
Tuskegee University  
University of Connecticut  
Andrea Dennis-LaVigne  
Bloomfield Animal Hospital  
Mentors  
Walter C. Bowie  
Ross University  
University of California-Davis  
Practice Owner  
Diversity  
African-American Veterinarian  
Randy LaVigne  
Eva Ceranowicz  
Linda Jacobson  
Theodore Cohn  
Women in Veterinary Medicine  
Women Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

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## Black History Month

### TOPICS:

Women Leadership in Veterinary Medicine  
African-American Veterinarians

### LEADING QUESTION:

What member of the University of Connecticut Board of Trustees is also a prominent leader in the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.