

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# The Difference Between Mentoring and Advocacy: The Story of Dr. Olive K. Britt

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
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The recent story by Cornell student Sarah Khatibzadeh<sup>1</sup> described Dr. Charles Raker as the consummate teacher and mentor, in addition to acclaiming his transformation leadership in equine surgery. I was one of the many young veterinarians he mentored when I was a surgery resident at New Bolton Center in the mid-1970s. But 15 years before I and others flocked to the University of Pennsylvania's premier large animal facility, Olive Kendrick Britt broke the women's barrier in equine medicine and surgery. Dr. Raker was her mentor, and also her advocate.

In a book on women in veterinary medicine published in 1991, Dr. Britt wrote about her December 1958 interview with Dr. Raker.<sup>2</sup>

*Dr. Charles Raker interviewed me over the Christmas holidays. "I'd love to have you," he told me, "but it's going to be a whale of a battle with the board of regents. I must get them used to the idea that a woman can do what I think you can do. If I win, you'll know by March.*

Olive Britt was born in London, England, when her father was stationed there during World War I. She grew up on a half-million acre ranch in New Mexico with 25,000 head of cattle and horses. "I remember learning to ride in this rugged country without borders," she later wrote. She would ride anything from a cow to a mule. "I have a photograph of myself, barely three, sitting on Antelope [the family's Jersey milk cow] and holding a chicken in my arms."<sup>3</sup>

Olive was an expert horsewoman and experienced a number of career adventures, all involving animals in one way or another, until she enrolled in the College of Veterinary Medicine in Athens, Georgia, in 1955 as one of the two women and 58 male students. "I was thirty-eight years old but no older than some classmates who were veterans of World War II and Korea."<sup>4</sup> Dr. Britt's allegiance to the University of Georgia continued through her lifetime and eventually culminated in a gift from her estate that established the Olive K. Britt--Paul Hoffman Professorship.<sup>5</sup>



*Class of 1959, University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine  
Olive K. Britt is in center, fourth row.  
(Photo courtesy of University of Georgia, 1959)*

By the time Dr. Britt was nearing the end of her four-year DVM program in Georgia, Dr. Raker was establishing his postgraduate program at New Bolton Center. These were the early days of dedicated clinical training that would, by the mid 1960s, become more formalized into programs eventually serving as qualification for admission into the American College of Veterinary Surgeons.

While Dr. Britt felt that she had enough practical experience to start her own practice, she felt that she did not have the knowledge to be a “good equine practitioner.”<sup>6</sup> Upon the advice of a friend who was just finishing his internship at New Bolton Center and who had recommended Olive to Dr. Raker, she was invited to New Bolton Center for an interview. Though she felt her meeting with Dr. Raker had gone well, she knew the competition was overwhelming and that the chance of her getting the only position available at the time, was remote. She made sure that she had several backup plans for employment available.

When the letter from Dr. Raker arrived in March, she carried it for a long time, mustering the courage to open it. She was overjoyed to read the opening sentence, “You have been accepted as our first woman intern in the large-animal clinic and are to report July 1.”<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Britt stayed at New Bolton for two years, completing what was then referred to as an internship-residency. Though she had many fine teachers, she attributed her success to Dr. Raker. “He fashioned in me the knowledge and confidence to become an accomplished equine practitioner.”<sup>8</sup>

As her mentor, Dr. Raker was active in all aspects of advancing Dr. Britt’s career, whether it was helping her learn new surgical techniques or insisting in the company of clients, who were unwilling to let a woman work on their valuable horses, that she was up to the task. “Olive, you do a beautiful job,” he once said almost under the nose of a reluctant client. “These people have to realize that they are not to look at you as a woman but as a veterinary surgeon. If he doesn’t want you to do it [the surgery], he can take his horse elsewhere.”

And that is where Dr. Raker upped the ante from mentor to advocate. Here was one of the country’s leading equine surgeons, and the person most responsible for building New Bolton’s reputation as the premier equine facility in the country. Two years earlier, he had put his reputation on the line by advocating to an unenthusiastic Board of Regents that it was time to break the gender barrier so he could hire a woman *as his only intern*. Having watched his resident develop into a clinician who had gained his confidence, he could now advocate for her to work as the primary surgeon on his cases. It would have been so easy for Dr. Raker to tell a skeptical and reluctant client that he would (albeit under protest) do the surgery himself, with his trainee assisting. *But instead, he translated his confidence in Dr. Britt into action.*

That is the definition of an advocate. As a mentor, Dr. Raker had shared knowledge and experience with his trainee. But as an advocate, he put his personal reputation and the reputation of the institution on the line. He did that, not only because he had the ability to assess accurately the level of competence of his staff, but also because he was a great teacher and a great leader for all of his trainees.

Veterinarians need mentors throughout their lives. But those who are so fortunate to have even one true advocate, especially early in their career, are greatly blessed.

Following her residency at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Britt went on to a distinguished career as the first women equine practitioner in Virginia. She practiced for many years both as a solo practitioner, then with a partner, Dr. M.D. Kingsbury. Together, they built a clinic and an equine practice that employed as many as five doctors. She returned to solo practice in 1985.

Dr. Britt passed in March 2006, at the age of 88.

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<sup>1</sup> Khatibzadeh, Sarah. A Memorial Tribute to Dr. Charles W. Raker. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. March 26, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Drum, S. and H.E. Whiteley. *WOMEN in Veterinary Medicine. Profiles of Success*. (Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1991), 36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>5</sup> [Donors endow three professorships in Veterinary Medicine](#). Georgia eNews. University of Georgia.

<sup>6</sup> Drum and Whiteley, *WOMEN in Veterinary Medicine. Profiles of Success.*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine

Charles W. Raker

University of Pennsylvania

New Bolton Center

Olive K. Britt

Mentors

Mentoring

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TOPIC:

Women in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

Who was the first woman intern and resident at New Bolton Center?

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.