

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Mentoring, with Gusto

In Memoriam ~ Farish A. Jenkins ~ 1940-2012

Editor's Note: This was written as part of a class project to acknowledge the life contribution of mentors. The author, a third-year student at Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine also presents it as a memorial tribute to her undergraduate advisor whom she considers to be an outstanding mentor.

Donald F. Smith

By Casey Cazer (Guest Author)

January 29, 2015

Education was once based on mentorship; it was about the relationship between teacher and pupil. Since Socrates and Plato, teachers and mentors were synonymous and students benefited from a combination of instruction and counseling. But as the number of people seeking secondary and higher education has increased, the mentoring relationship between teachers and students has been usurped by the need to disseminate as much knowledge as possible to as many students as possible. My favorite professor understood that mentorship is at the heart of teaching and the counseling and role-modeling that he gave to me were transformational to my career.



*Casey Cazer, Cornell DVM Candidate 2016 volunteering at the NY State Fair Dairy Birthing Center
(Photo provided by Dr. Cazer)*



Dr. Farish A. Jenkins
(Photo provided by Dr Casey Cazer)

Farish A. Jenkins was an evolutionary biologist and paleontologist at Harvard University and was often assigned pre-vet advisees because there were no faculty veterinarians in the biology department. However, I was not discouraged by having an advisor outside of my field of study because it quickly became evident that Farish had much more to offer than a letter of recommendation for veterinary school applications.

Through sharing stories of his own work—expeditions to the Arctic, safaris in southern Africa, fitting together fossilized feet of dinosaurs—he opened my eyes to a world of discovery and inquiry. It was evident that innate curiosity was a driving factor in his work and contributed to his groundbreaking discoveries. The personal stories he shared made his work come alive, made it tangible such that I wanted to be a part of it.

An ex-Marine, Farish carried vodka and a rifle on Arctic expeditions, during which he and his collaborators would discover *Tiktaalik roseae*, the link between water and land vertebrates. But I knew him as a professor in an office with filing cabinets full of publications and fossils meticulously spread out on a table. For many months he had a dinosaur's unarticulated foot on his desk. When I inquired about it, he explained that most museums were posturing the *Plateosaurus* incorrectly as a bipedal animal walking on its toes. Farish pointed out subtle contours of the metatarsal-phalangeal joint, demonstrating that the current posture resulted in a hyperextension of the joint. His observational finding contributed to a long-ranging debate among paleontologists and the plantigrade stance became more commonplace in museums. Over 4 years I heard many stories of discovery like that one, each challenging me to take on a larger role in the pursuit of new knowledge. Farish inspired me to strive to make a difference in the world, even if it is a small one.

Farish's confidence in me surpassed my own self-assurance, which helped me to see how I could take my veterinary education above and beyond traditional veterinary careers. He always thought that I could do more, be more, than I did. With guidance and support he illuminated my full potential and it glittered at the end of a new road. Farish showed me that road and he would help me travel it.

He suggested summer research programs but also supported me in my quest for pre-veterinary experience at dairy farms and race tracks. When I wanted to study animal nutrition, Farish volunteered to help me with an independent study. But he actually knew nothing about animal nutrition, so once a week for a semester I taught him nutrition that I learned through a textbook and primary literature. I presented case studies on ketosis in dairy cows and Farish was fascinated. He said that he was thankful for my teaching and excited to have learned about a new topic, which he even used on an African safari that he led that year. His genuine enthusiasm was my reward.

This experience demonstrated to me that mentoring is a two-way relationship. The mentor cannot be expected to be the only party with something to give. A mentee's contribution might be introducing an interest or hobby, teaching a unique topic, or sharing unique life experiences. Each mentoring relationship is unique, but the mentee must contribute more than just gratitude for the mentor's advice and help because lasting, meaningful relationships can only be built on reciprocity.

Farish wasn't just a mentor, but also a sponsor. He connected me with opportunities both within and outside of Harvard. He used the full extent of his professional network to help me reach my goals. And he didn't stop with my admission to vet school. After I was accepted at Cornell, he reached out to friends here and helped form my early connections with Cornell's faculty.

I didn't really know what a mentor was, or could be, until I spent time with Farish. He always went above and beyond his formal responsibilities as my academic advisor. He praised my work and initiatives and demonstrated a sincere interest in my career and personal life. It was that personal connection that made our mentoring relationship meaningful--not just a "checking in" about academic progress or writing recommendation letters. Farish's belief in me and his unwavering support continues to guide me along the road to my full potential. It is because of his unchecked enthusiasm for discovery that I found my passion for research. He also helped cultivate my aptitude for teaching. I will continue to strive for impact in everything that I do because that is what Farish would expect from me and I'm not going to let him down.

On June 4, 2012, Dr. Farish Jenkins shared this testament with students in his closing remarks at Harvard's Great Transformations Symposium and Celebration:

"You will take joy in two things. These were the joys that have come in my life. Discovery. When discovery hits you, you're looking at something and you don't see it. Then all of the sudden you do see it...Those days will be days of your life's

highest elation...The other great happiness that is waiting for you as students is that you will become teachers....if you are good teachers you will convey your enthusiasm, your love, and your insight, so that all of the sudden you turn out classes of people who really appreciate the natural world of organisms... And this gives you great joy and gives them great joy and you suddenly realize that these students came to Harvard University for education and, by gosh, they didn't get it from very many courses but they got it from you."

KEYWORDS:

Farish A. Jenkins
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Mentor
Mentoring
Harvard University
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TOPIC:

Mentors and Mentoring

LEADING QUESTION:

How can a veterinary student "give back" to a mentor who has provided so much guidance?

META-SUMMARY:

A veterinary student describes the two-way relationship with her mentor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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