

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# A First-Year Veterinary Student Meets her Mentor during Spring Break

By Natasja Lavin (Guest Author)  
May 1, 2015

When I first met Dr. Robert McKee outside of a Hampton Inn, I was immediately reminded of my Grandfather. It sounds corny, but the resemblance was uncanny. The smile, the kind eyes, the big eyebrows and even his facial expressions; so I was instantly drawn to him as a mentor figure.



*Dr. Ayari (veterinarian in the Dominican Republic), the author and Dr. Robert McKee preparing to operate on puppies in rural Arizona, 2015*  
(Photo provided by the author)

It was a hot March day in Phoenix at the start of our Rural Area Veterinary Service (RAVS) trip. RAVS is a non-profit program under the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association that sponsors service and educational trips in many locations across the country every year.<sup>1</sup> Ours would take place in the highlands of Arizona, in the small Apache Reservation town of White River, a gorgeous setting with a backdrop of red mountains and blue skies. Our caravan of eight veterinarians, about 30 veterinary students, five veterinary technicians and four additional volunteers, along with a horse trailer packed to the brim with our make-shift collapsible veterinary clinic, made the four-hour drive from Phoenix into rural Apache territory. And once

we got there, chance would have it that Dr. Bob (as he is known to everyone in the RAVS community) would be the veterinarian who would instruct me in my first real surgical procedure, the spay of a small fluffy black dog named Miss Kiss.



*Caravan of veterinary personnel and supplies in rural Arizona, 2015.*

(Photo by Ellen Reinke)

Dr. Bob is originally from Missouri, though his family moved around a lot as he was a self-described “Air Force Brat.” For most of his childhood and adolescence he lived on a farm in California, Missouri, with his parents, before attending college at the University of Missouri. When he applied to veterinary college, he also chose Missouri and earned his DVM at the tuition of around \$1800 a semester.

After graduation, he moved with his now ex-wife to South Carolina because she “liked the East,” and he decided after visiting “that it was fine with me.” At first he worked as an associate for a multiple veterinarian small animal practice in Easley, but knew he would always want a practice of his own. In 1989, he opened Foothills Animal Hospital in the small town of Liberty, which he created out of a building that had previously been a restaurant.<sup>2</sup> He told me during our phone interview that he doesn’t know if it’s possible anymore to do it the way he did it. His total educational debt after college was around \$18,000, and he had almost all of it paid off by the time he was interested in buying a practice of his own.

I have wondered the same thing. I want to own my own practice someday, but I don’t know what my financial future holds. In 1989 Dr. Bob knew he wanted to be able to work for himself, and that was a big reason he chose to pursue veterinary medicine. For me, a big part of my happiness is being able to make my own decisions in my career, especially when it has consequences for an animal’s life or a family’s happiness. As Dr. Bob put it, “When it’s bad it’s my fault, and when it’s good it’s my fault.”

The other main reason I look up to Dr. Bob is his yearly involvement with RAVS. He has been attending these trips every year since 2004, giving up time at his own practice to volunteer as a surgeon for a community without access to veterinary care, teaching veterinary students how to do surgery. He says it's exhausting and that each year he decides maybe he won't go back. "Maybe I'll take an actual vacation," he told me, but when the time comes to apply, he always does. When I asked him what he loved about RAVS, he said it was "the kids," meaning me and the other students.

When Dr. Bob first started doing RAVS, he said he was in a place in his career where he "was getting bummed about the way kids were... kids were not good kids." Then, he said he went on an RAVS trip, where students had saved up hundreds of dollars to go help animals and communities in need, paying out of pocket to work fifteen hour days with neither showers nor beds, and he said that struck him year after year. "You guys..." he paused a second to think about it, "You guys inspire me."

Really, it's Dr. Bob who inspires me. He started volunteering with RAVS after relief work for Hurricane Katrina led him to cross paths with Dr. Eric Davis, a DVM from UC- Davis and the founder of RAVS. Dr. Davis made a great impression on Dr. Bob, and he later checked to see what Dr. Davis and RAVS were all about.



*Dr. Robert McKee instructing a veterinary student on the proper technique to perform an ovariohysterectomy in a dog, 2015*  
(Photo by Ellen Reinke)

Now, Dr. Bob runs his veterinary practice during the majority of the year in a rural underserved area of South Carolina. He is on call every day of the week, every hour of the day. He runs a boarding kennel with his clinic and he walks the dogs himself every day while they are staying at Foothills Animal Hospital. He hasn't had a "real vacation" since 1999, he told me.



*The author with a puppy under her care, 2015*  
(Photo provided by the author)

I'm not sure I could ever have that level of dedication, but his example is a shining one to aspire to. And in his "free" time? He packs some belongings into a backpack, travels halfway across the country to serve animals and families who are desperately in need, sleeps on the floor, works long hours with no showers, and gets joy and inspiration from teaching the next generation of students how to become excellent surgeons.

If I can emulate even a fraction of the vet and person Dr. Bob is, I will be a success.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rural Area Veterinary Services, <http://www.ruralareavet.org>

<sup>2</sup> Foothills Animal Hospital, Liberty, South Carolina. <http://bobmckee.com/>

**KEYWORDS:**

Dr. Robert McKee  
Rural Area Veterinary Services  
Mentor

**TOPIC:**

Mentors in Veterinary Medicine

**LEADING QUESTION:**

How do first-year veterinary students learn about veterinary practice in remote areas?

---

**META-SUMMARY:**

A first-year Cornell veterinary student travels to Arizona to participate in the Rural Area Veterinary Service program.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Natasja Lavin DVM is a member of the Class of 2018 at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, Ithaca, New York.