



Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

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Willis recognized for work with cows, students – and knots

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As supervisor of Cornell's Teaching Dairy Barn in the College of Veterinary Medicine, Gerald W. Willis Jr. was recognized with the George Peter Award for Dedicated Service for his care for the university's dairy herd and his work with veterinary students and faculty.

Gerald W. Willis Jr. knows his way around cows: He has spent the past 30 years teaching veterinary students how to work with them.

As supervisor of Cornell's Teaching Dairy Barn in the College of Veterinary Medicine, Willis was recognized with the George Peter Award for Dedicated Service March 29 for his care for the university's dairy herd and his work with veterinary students and faculty.

The award was given to Willis by Mary Opperman, vice president and chief human resources officer, who "was struck by how your nominators Nita Irby and Carolyn McDaniel talk about the things you do for the students." Willis' colleagues and family were in attendance at the presentation.

Irby met Willis in 1997, when she was a new faculty member at the veterinary college looking for advice on setting up the bovine lab for first-year students. Everyone she asked said, "Just ask Jerry!" When she did, letting him know the times, dates and subject matters of the labs, he set them up "just like magic." Over the 11 years Irby taught the course,

Willis assumed the role of lead instructor in the bovine safety and restraint labs, teaching students how to prepare and milk cows. He also taught students how to tie knots that could be quickly released.

Willis is “a dedicated employee and teacher and is the heart and soul of the Teaching Dairy Barn at Cornell. Having witnessed his work in the barns, in the herd and his teaching and student interactions in labs, I am fully supportive of any recognition, promotion and support that we can provide to Jerry,” Irby wrote in her letter of nomination.



Gerald Willis celebrates with his family. From left: Daughter Suzanne Manzari; son Matt Willis; Gerald Willis; granddaughter Lily Manzari, in front of Gerald's wife, Linda Willis; and granddaughter Briana Dowd at far right.

McDaniel, another veterinarian and faculty member, called Willis “an excellent teacher and role model in bovine labs ... His calm, patient support helps students leave the labs with new skills and knowledge, but also with confidence and a sense of accomplishment.” When McDaniel wanted to increase students’ exposure to the dairy barn and bovine husbandry, Willis organized and regularly supervised a morning chores program for them.

Also speaking on Willis’ behalf was Blake Nguyen, director of the Teaching Dairy operation, and Chuck Guard, faculty supervisor for the Veterinary Teaching Dairy Barn, chief of the Ambulatory and Production Medicine Clinic, and Willis’ supervisor for more than 20 years. In his letter of nomination, Guard wrote of Willis’ ability to repair broken machinery; deal “magnanimously” with bureaucratic hassles; help resolve problems “with kindness and generosity”; and remain “tireless” in the ordinary tasks of the dairy barn. “Almost all our veterinary students have genuine affection for Jerry based on their interactions with him as employees or as beginning veterinary students learning about cows and farming,” he noted.

When asked about receiving the award, Willis said, “I’ve enjoyed myself at Cornell, spending time with the people involved in the work of the dairy barn, especially the students and faculty.” He added, “I am honored to have received the award and spent my time here at Cornell.”

The award is given by the Employee Assembly to recognize outstanding staff contributions “above and beyond” normal job expectations. Nominees are chosen by their peers and must demonstrate superior ability to work effectively in collaboration with peers, subordinates, supervisors and others; be an excellent team player; and have a positive influence on colleagues, a professional field or program, or the university.



Nominators Carolyn McDaniel and Nita Irby at the George Peter Award celebration for Gerald Willis.

By Nancy Doolittle

This story originally appeared in PawPrint.