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Workin' for Peanuts

Written by Dr. Sally Ness



You just never know where your next smile may come from. Not a regular, everyday smile, but one that leaves your whole heart grinning too....

The New York State Fair. Twelve humid days of funnel cake and cotton candy, bloated goats and scouring calves. A vibrant landscape of family and friends all gathered together to soak up the last remaining drops of summer. For a Cornell veterinary resident like me, this two week field trip is an annual reminder that veterinary medicine can, in fact, be practiced without the help of an MRI, EKG, or COP. I'm here to be served a hearty bite of the life of a country vet - with a side of kettle corn.

The call comes at around midnight – a gruff voice breaths into the line, “I think we’ve got a sick cow in the dairy barn, can ya come an’ take a look?” Responding in well practiced routine, I slip coveralls over my pajamas, grab my keys and stethoscope, and steer the sputtering golf cart through the tents and arenas to the dairy barn. The concerts have long finished, the gates are now locked, and the swarms of meandering fair-goers have been replaced by the flurry of the late night cleaning crew. Working under the neon glow of the carnival lights, they furiously erase the remnants of the day in preparation for tomorrow.

Upon arrival at the dairy barn, I am surprised to find not a gruff man and a cow, but a 13-year-old boy and his 6-month-old heifer calf. His name is Matt. Her name is Peanuts. He looks stressed. She looks awful. Awfully dehydrated, that is. With eyes so sunken they practically touch inside her skull, she is the bovine version of a potato chip. Rumen is dry and hard. Heart rate is high. Not ideal. He reports that she had been a little colicky earlier after a 5 hours haul from home in the heat of the day. Doing his best to help her, he had given her banamine and polyflex, since that is what his dad does when his cows are a bit ‘off’ at home. He had also walked her – for hours. Totally exhausted, she now stands with her head and her ears drooping, kicking at her belly just often enough to say that she hurts there, too. There is anxiety in his eyes when he says, “I did everything my dad does, but I think she’s gotten worse!” No kidding kid.

Step one: rehydrate. I tube her with water and electrolytes and am contemplating in which side to place the IV catheter when he pops the million dollar fair question: “Is Peanuts still going to be able to show tomorrow?” Crud. The obvious answer is no; the day is almost upon us and this calf is about as likely to make it into the show ring

as a college kid is to finish a marathon after a week in Cancun. She needs rest – and fluids. With ‘No’ forming on my lips, I watch him gently stroke her ears and I am reminded of my own small town roots and childhood state fair experiences. This week was a big deal. A really big deal. So much time and hard work, so much of summer break went into preparing for the final hour that was the state fair. I decide to ride the fence: “Well, Matt, I don’t know. Let’s see what we can do.” Knowing an IV catheter would be a sure way to get the night supervisor’s attention – and Matt’s name scratched from the entry lists tomorrow – I head to the vet office to see what I’ve got. I survey my stash of supplies and return to the dairy barn packing a simplex, hypertonic saline and two 5 liter bags of fluids. By this time we have drawn a small late night crowd of concerned observers - similarly aged boys from Matt’s 4-H group - which is good because we are going to need their help. Matt holds Peanuts while I guide a 14 gauge needle into her jugular. One boy holds the bottle of hypertonic, another holds the fluids, still another holds a pocket knife. Two other boys, both a bit older, supervise. We give Peanuts most of the bottle of hypertonic, and then dump out the remainder. With me still manning my position at her neck, the boys cut the base off the bottle and then carefully pour in the fluid from a punctured bag. They work with absolute focus: pouring carefully to avoid spilling, lifting the bottle high above their heads, then bringing it back down for refilling just before it empties and lets air invade the line. Soon, we are finished. Soak it up, Peanuts. Now it is time to wait. We call it a night and agree to meet back first thing in the morning.

6am. Pulling up to the dairy barn through the early morning fog, there is already a steady flow of bovine traffic to and from the wash rack. The sounds of blow dryers and clippers resonate from inside. It’s show time. As I turn down Peanuts’ aisle, I say a little prayer under my breath. Please let her be better. Please don’t make me wreck this kid’s state fair. Please. I head toward her stall, but as I draw nearer, it is not Peanuts that I see first. It is Matt. He is sound asleep on a cot, with no blanket, less than a foot from his calf. He must have slept with her all night. He is out cold, one hand dangling limply in the hay at her side. Peanuts, on the other hand, pricks her ears and turns her head to greet me. She is happily chewing her cud. Eyes bright and no longer sunken. Water buckets half empty. Thank goodness. Matt’s class isn’t until 3pm, so I wake him just enough to tell him his calf is going to be okay to show before letting him drift back into exhausted slumber. His 4-H leader, who is by now aware of last night’s festivities - thanks to Matt’s comrades - walks by and mouths the words “thank you.”

I return at 11am to check on the pair. Matt, looking freshly pressed and ready for action, greets me with a smile. He is already fully dressed in his showmanship attire: boots polished and number neatly pinned to his front. I glance at my watch and smile; he still has 4 hours. Peanuts chews her cud contently and appears oblivious to the raucous she caused merely a few hours ago. I turn to go and Matt stops me. “Don’t I need to pay you?” he asks. I’m astounded that a 13-year-old kid would show such responsibility. I do have a bill in my pocket, a mere \$37.00 thanks to special fair pricing, but I had planned on asking his 4-H club leader for his parents’ phone number and settling with them directly. When I offer my plan to him, he simply says, “No ma’am, I can pay for it,” and whips out a little wallet from his crisply starched Wrangler jeans. He counts out \$37 in mostly fives and ones, and then hands them over decisively. “Do you have enough money for the rest of fair? For food?” I ask. “Yes, ma’am, I have lots.” He begins brushing the already immaculate Peanuts and says, “Ya know, I think she just wanted some extra attention!”

Four hours and a blue showmanship ribbon later, all was well again in the dairy barn. As I sat in the stands watching Matt’s class, I couldn’t help but grin and once again be reminded that we vets are so fortunate to do what we do. In an unlikely place at an unlikable time, I bumped into a boy and a calf that left my heart feeling full and made my day, my week, and



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probably much, much, more - all by just doing my job. There's a reason we don't do this for the money – our return is cash for the soul. I'll take that any day of the week and twice on Sunday.