



Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

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Cornell veterinary class of 2020 celebrates white coat ceremony

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Third-year veterinary students swear the Veterinarian's Oath at the 2019 White Coat ceremony. Photo by Rachel Philipson.

Third-year veterinary students along with friends, family and mentors gathered on Saturday to celebrate the time honored tradition of donning their white lab coats, signifying their transition into clinical training. The 2019 Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine's White Coat Ceremony took place at Bailey Hall, officiated by the Austin O. Hooey Dean of Veterinary Medicine, Lorin D. Warnick, D.V.M., Ph.D. '94, and Assistant Dean for Students and Instruction, Katherine Edmondson, M.S. '85, Ph.D. '89. Mark Olcott, D.V.M. '95, president of the alumni association executive board, administered the Veterinarian's Oath, and Lisa Freeman '81, M.S. '86, D.V.M. '86, president of Northern Illinois University (NIU), served as the event's keynote speaker.

Dean Warnick opened the event by welcoming the attendees, and then took some time to recount some of his stand-out memories of his own experience on working as an ambulatory clinician. He recalled humorous moments such as the time when a student ate a cold can of Campbell's tomato soup for lunch — or when he visited an Amish farm and was helped by a four- and six-year old to get a recalcitrant cow into a stall. "Value the knowledge and observations of clients have of their own animals, even if only six years old," Warnick advised.

After his remarks, Assistant Dean Edmondson joined Warnick on the stage to guide third-year students through their coating ceremony. Students stepped on to the stage, and a mentor of their choosing helped to slide the white lab coat over the shoulders of each elated participant, signifying the moment that these budding veterinarians would officially begin their clinical training.

Alumni Association Executive Board President Olcott next led the students through the Veterinarian's Oath, which the third-years repeated after him with their right hands raised.

Next, Dr. Leni Kaplan '91, lecturer in the Community Practice Service, presented the John F. Cummings Memorial award to this year's winner, third-year student Laura St. Clair. Established in 1996 in memory of John Cummings '58, D.V.M. '62, Ph.D. '66, the James Law Professor of Anatomy who taught at Cornell for 29 years. The scholarship provides financial assistance to a student who has demonstrated clear and outstanding academic achievement in the study of veterinary medicine or comparative medicine.

To close the ceremony, alumna and NIU president Lisa Freeman spoke.

“Today, when you put on the symbolic white coat, you will look and feel different to others — and to yourselves. You, members of the Class of 2020, will vary in how you feel about this transition — whether you are completely comfortable with the choices you have made — whether you feel fully prepared for your clinical rotations. It's perfectly OK,” said Freeman.

“In fact, I hope this won't be the last time the profession challenges you to feel this way. One of the greatest things about veterinary medicine is the breadth of career options and the associated opportunities for continued growth and reinvention. My own career pathway certainly speaks to this.”

Freeman spoke about how, as NIU president, she uses the same skills that she learned as a fourth-year veterinary student. “I observe, listen and then use that experience to synthesize a plan,” she said. “I act with incomplete information, understanding that adjusting downstream can yield better outcomes than doing nothing. I pursue pathways that are the best options in the context of limited resources. I clean up messes that I didn't make, and I work with a team of caring individuals who share my values.”

By Lauren Cahoon Roberts