



## College News

wiederhold > collins > lifted > Tobago > Mike > Tello

### Alumni Spotlight: Cesar Tello '97

#### **Trials and triumphs of starting a new veterinary practice in NYC's Latino community**

After eight years at Cornell, Peruvian-born Cesar Tello BS '93 DVM '97 launched into a fast-paced veterinary career in New York City, where he now owns a thriving practice. On March 29, 2011, Tello returned to his alma mater to share his story with a diverse group of students from across the university. Tello spoke of his trials and triumphs as a sole practice owner in one of New York City's immigrant neighborhood where a majority of his clients do not speak English, and how it has strengthened his skills and enriched his experiences as a veterinarian.

"A solid social foundation is essential, in school and beyond," said Tello, who came from Peru to New York City when he was one and half years old with his veterinarian parents. "The worst feeling is feeling alone; you have to build and use your network. As an undergrad I joined a Latino fraternity and several cultural and political student organizations. When I started veterinary school, I stayed involved with the student groups down campus, even joining them in a sit-in protest at Day Hall. When vet school got tough, I started connecting with veterinary students as well. We all pulled each other through."

The value of camaraderie and the networking skills Tello cultivated at Cornell proved vital later in his career. Through networking he found his first veterinary job in Staten Island. "It paid \$40,000 a year for 80 hours of work per week. But the working habits you established in the first two years out of veterinary school stay with you forever. I was a sponge and was determined to learn everything I could."



Tello built his skills in various kinds of practices, including a house call service and an emergency night service where he worked from 5 pm to 8 am. "Emergencies taught me to do what needed to be done despite the anxiety. You see some scary things and have to act fast. I was scared, but I wasn't scared enough not to help," said Tello. "That's where I really learned leadership."

At the age of 29, Tello had gained enough confidence, experience, and leadership to brave the trials of starting his own practice. He opened Noah's Ark Pet Clinic in Jackson Heights, a Queens' neighborhood

housing 130,000 people in a one-mile radius, 80 percent of who speak only Spanish. Tello is the sole owner and practitioner, managing seven employees and fielding a heavy stream of clients.

“I was a young guy starting a new business; there were a lot of things working against me. Speaking to people, gaining their trust, showing confidence in your knowledge and skills, it’s a vital art. So I go back to basics: honesty and integrity matter and so does a network of support. I got to know my neighbors, my colleagues, my employees, and my clients. I can call up other veterinarians in the area and refer cases, we have a good camaraderie. I try to create a comfortable space for clients where we keep an open dialogue. My office has a library; clients come in with questions about a case and I bring out textbooks and show them what I’m talking about. Owners come in all forms, and I try to be fair with everyone.”

As the intensive labor of opening settled and business bloomed, Tello sought new ways of becoming involved with his community. He began a mentorship program for diverse high school and college students. “The first thing I do is ask them for resumes,” he said. “Many of them don’t have one so making them prepare one shows them what they need to start off in the world. We talk about their goals, activities, and educational decisions. Each year about 10-15 students come through my office. I let them know that as long as they keep in touch, I’ll write a good recommendation for them. Maybe four in the past 5 years have actually gone on to vet school.”

Asked why there are so few minorities in veterinary school, Tello said there is no easy answer. “To be a veterinarian is the number one aspiration of kindergarten students around the country,” said Tello. “Somewhere in the education pipeline, something breaks down. Grades are the gatekeeper into vet school, and grades start in kindergarten. No matter who you are, a strong education and supportive social network are essential. I try to be a role model, to show it can be done.”

Tello finished paying his student loans two years ago, ends appointments at 4pm, and leaves work promptly at 5pm to return to his wife and young daughter. He continues his involvement in Cornell as a College of Veterinary Medicine Alumni Board Member, and as part of the Cornell Alumni Trustee nominating committee. His talk was arranged by the students of VOICE (Veterinarians as One in Color and Ethnicity), in collaboration with the Latino Studies Program, Cornell's Pre-Vet Society, and the College's Student-Alumni Network Group

