

by Dr. Megan Palsa

A Passion for Animals, a Love for all *The Stevensons continue to give...*

Keith Stevenson and his wife, Mattie, share both a name and a passion for animals with their aunt Madlin Stevenson, an early donor to the Stevenson Companion Animal Life-Care Center at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences (CVM).

Keith and Mattie Stevenson both began their lifelong fondness for four-legged friends at young ages. Now, they have nine cats ranging from a six-month-old kitten to a

22-year-old “senior citizen.” The cats enjoy the area of their home that Keith calls the “Catatorium.” Its brightly colored rooms have been outfitted with ramps and cubbyholes for climbing, window seats from which to view the world, and large open areas for play. Some of the cats don’t appreciate dogs, so the Catatorium is a dog-free zone.

The cats’ canine “sister” is 12-year-old Bella, who was only about a year old when the Stevensons spotted her at a busy Houston intersection during rush hour. The rescue attempt was precarious, to say the least, and Bella was missing a foot, but she was eventually corralled, Mattie said. Over the years the shape of Bella’s stub has changed, so the Stevensons have provided her with several different prosthetic devices. Bella’s current “shoe” is the best one she has ever had. Bill Bickley of Houston made this prosthesis of carbon fiber, so it is lightweight, but strong. “It’s very high tech. It looks like one that an athlete would wear,” Mattie said. “She’s got a nice step, bounce, and roll. Bella is a four-legged dog when she has her shoe on.”

Like her aunt, Mattie says all of the animals she has known have added to the quality of her life. She has met some of her best friends while out walking her dogs. “The animals enrich my life very much,” she said. “The friends I have met and the pets we love mean so much to me.”

Remembering Aunt Madlin

The Stevensons said Madlin was a remarkable lady, full of life, energy, compassion, and determination. She faced every day of her 96 years with gusto and humor. “Nothing ever, ever worried her or bothered her,” Mattie said, “except for one thing: What would happen to her beloved pets, or her ‘kids,’ as she called them, when she passed on?”

Madlin had 13 dogs, several cats, a pony, and a llama. In the early 1990s, she heard about a proposal to start the building of a facility on the campus at Texas A&M University. “This facility would be a place where people could send their pets to live forever in home-like comfort when they were no longer able to care for them,” Mattie said. “Such a place was the answer to Madlin’s prayers.”

Mattie said her aunt, an interior designer, jumped right in and was involved with the center while it was still a drawing on paper. Mattie noted that she and her aunt frequently visited the center in the early days to see what items might be needed. Madlin donated much of the original furniture and many decorative items still in use at the center. Being encouraged to participate in the planning process brought “so much comfort” to Madlin, her niece said. Madlin knew that her rescued animals would be safe and loved for the rest of their lives.

“It has been a wonderful experience watching the center grow,” Mattie said. “It was a privilege meeting Dr. Ned Ellet, who dreamed of building the companion animal center at the CVM.” Ellet and Dr. Bubba Woytek, assistant vice



Mattie Stevenson with two of her cats in the “Catatorium”



Mattie Stevenson with Bella

president of development at the college, first visited with Madlin about the center over 20 years ago. “Ever since that first visit, every promise they made to Madlin has been kept, and then some!” Mattie said.

A utopia for pets

The Stevenson Center is a “bit of a utopia for the pets that are there,” as Mattie puts it. For the resident pets, the days are filled with people coming and going, lots of playtime, and supervising their humans performing chores. The evenings are spent lounging with the other animals and cuddling with the resident veterinary students. The animals come from all manner of environments; in some homes they were one of several pets, and in others they were the only animal. However, they are able to adjust at the center and live in harmony with the other residents, due in large part to the compassion and patience shown to them by the staff.

“All you have to do is walk through that door...tail-wagging dogs race to greet you. Then you see cats lounging on the direc-

tor’s desk or curled up in a student’s lap while they’re studying,” Mattie said. “You don’t really have to say anything once you’ve actually visited the center. Once you’ve seen it—you get it.”

The Stevensons have always found the staff and students to be caring, dedicated, and extremely professional. “It’s truly a labor of love,” Mattie said, noting the sadness the staff members exhibit when a resident pet dies. “The animals are dearly, dearly missed by the people who work there. The pets spend their final days just enveloped by love [in] a beautiful, peaceful environment.”

Mattie enjoys visiting the center with friends who may be considering enrolling their pets, and she is proud to show off the building. After two expansions, the structure is “very impressive,” she said, and the guests have a glimpse of the comfortable, compassionate world their pets may inhabit.

Of particular interest to her aunt, Mattie remembered, was the role pets played in the lives of the elderly. “The older you get, the smaller your circle of friends becomes,” she noted. “If you know your pets will be cared for when you are no longer able to care for them, you’re not afraid to bring a new cat or dog into your home.”

A gift that keeps on giving

Mattie said it is a “win-win” situation when a pet owner enrolls his or her animal at the Stevenson Center. The pets come in with an endowment, and the income from that money provides for pets while they’re living at the center, paying for their care, maintenance, and any veterinary bills. Once the pet has passed on, the endowment’s income can be used in a number of ways, according to the wishes of the animal’s owner: it can stay at the Stevenson Center and be used for the next building project or maintenance, go toward scholarships, or help support a variety of other educational or research projects at the CVM.

“You can be confident that the pets you love will have the finest care possible for the rest of their lives,” Mattie said, “and you can specify exactly how those funds will be used.”

Proximity to excellent medical care

Another advantage of the center is that it’s adjacent to the CVM on the campus of Texas A&M, the Stevensons said. Mattie visits the Small Animal Hospital with her pets and sees pets from the center at the hospital for their regular checkups. All the pet residents at the center are guaranteed the finest veterinary care and the doctors at the CVM immediately deal with any medical need that may arise. Before enrolled pets even move into the center, their first stop is the animal hospital for evaluation and a complete physical. The veterinarians both determine the pet’s unique medical and dietary needs and develop individual health maintenance programs.

“I wish Dr. Ellet and Madlin were here to see the wonderful reality of their dream,” Mattie said. “I know they would be so pleased and grateful to everyone who has helped to make the center the wonderful home that it is.”

The Stevensons want what their aunt wanted for their companion animals. “Since none of us knows the future,” Mattie said, “we love knowing that should something happen to us while our pets are still alive, there will always be a wonderful place on the campus of Texas A&M University waiting to welcome them home.” 🍀