



# TUFTS SETS THE BAR HIGH

.....for Community Programs .....



**T**ufts at Tech Community Veterinary Clinic is the nation's first on-the-job veterinary clinic at a high school developed in collaboration with a veterinary school. It allows students in the Veterinary Assisting program at the Worcester Technical High School to gain hands-on experience while working toward a traditional diploma and an Approved Veterinary Assistant certificate from NAVTA. And the high schoolers' mentors happen to be fourth-year students from Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University. The animals seen at this unique clinic belong to pet caretakers who reside in the local economically depressed community.

"This program works on so many levels," says Dr. Greg Wolfus, Clinical Assistant Professor at Cummings and Director of Tufts at Tech.

"You never know what's going to walk through the door," says fourth year veterinary Tufts student Tyler Maddox. "We evaluate patients and make a tentative diagnosis. It's not like real life, it is real life," adds Maddox.

Pam Houde, CVT, has been a participating instructor at Tufts at Tech for over four years and a technician for 14 years. "Everyone in the program learns in a very real way about the human-animal bond. It's humbling," she says. "We all come together for one purpose." And that's one of the lessons the high school students learn. Pets inherently teach unselfishness when they are vulnerable and rely on us for care.

A part of Houde's job is to assist DVM students by teaching blood draws, induction, positioning for radiographs and much more, including communication skills, particularly when difficult euthanasia discussions are required.

Wolfus says that, in his opinion, the life lessons veterinary students learn are just as important as diagnostics and clinical techniques.

Houde agrees, "The veterinary students learn to pay it forward. We routinely see clients who barely have money for food, but somehow scrape enough money together to treat a pet."

In just a few weeks time Maddox and her

veterinary student classmates diagnosed and followed up with surgeries for everything from pyometra and entropion, to all sorts of dental procedures, removing a mass from a cat's face, and providing low-cost spay/neuters. Euthanasia is also a reality in the clinic, and students learn to have compassionate conversations with pet owners.

High school students take client histories, assist the veterinary students with handling patients, help prep animals for surgery, learn about reading lab reports, help with cleaning and book future appointments. "I've learned about caring for others who need help," says Juliette Tarnuzzer, who is a 16-year-old junior at Worcester Technical High School.

Worcester Technical High School offers other real-life programs including carpentry, automobile technology, web development, culinary arts, cosmetology and allied health to learn to become a certified nursing assistant.

The Veterinary Assisting program prepares students to take the NAVTA test for

*Figure 1 (left): Tyler Maddox, a 4th year veterinary student at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, examines a specimen under a microscope while Pam Houde, Tufts at Tech Clinic Manager and CVT, looks on. (Credit: Blue Ambrosia Photography - Gillian Kruskall)*

*Figure 2 (middle): Dr. Gregory Wolfus reviews a radiograph with students. (Credit: Blue Ambrosia Photography - Gillian Kruskall)*

*Figure 3 (right): Juliette Tarnuzzer spends time with a feline patient. (Credit: Blue Ambrosia Photography - Gillian Kruskall)*

becoming an Approved Veterinary Assistant, which about 99 percent of the program's grads have passed since the test became part of the program in 2010.

"It's hard to comprehend what walking in the shoes of some of these high school students is like," says Wolfus. "My goal isn't to make them all veterinarians, or even veterinary professionals. My goal is, yes, to expose them to veterinary medicine, but mostly to teach them life lessons that they can use to be productive and responsible contributors to society as adults."

As for the vet students? "I mean there's nothing like this," says Wolfus. "They are mentors themselves (to the high school students), and learn so many skills which just don't happen in a classroom setting. The

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**Figure 4:** Tyler Maddox examines a cat's eyes while Pam Houde safely restrains the cat. (Credit: Blue Ambrosia Photography - Gillian Kruskall)

greatest challenges are incredible teaching moments, like showing an older person who has difficulty using their hands how to give oral medication, or finding a way to communicate with a client where English is a second language."

Maddox adds that her most important lesson is knowing that she's making a difference. "The clients may not be able to afford every possible diagnostic test or treatment, but we make what we can affordable. We do what we can and people are so appreciative. This makes me feel so positively about our profession."

President Barack Obama spoke at Worcester Tech's graduation in 2014, saying that he "challenged high schools all across the country to do what you're doing — to better prepare students for the demands of the global economy."

Some critics have suggested, "If you can't afford veterinary care, you shouldn't have a pet." Wolfus replies that Tufts at Tech is a model that proves that notion wrong. "I've never been so proud to be associated with anything in my life." Many economically challenged pet owners provide loving and wonderful pet homes.

Houde tells the story of her homemade Shepherd's pie which she brought to work for herself. A woman and her son came to the clinic and were so distraught; her husband had just died and on this day their beloved cat was euthanized. When Houde heard the family didn't know where to

turn for the evening's dinner, in no small part because they didn't have money — she offered them the Shepherd's pie. It was a simple act of giving.

Houde says that is what Tufts and Tech is all about. Giving hands-on education to vet students, life direction and skills to high school students, and in many cases saving the life of a pet family member. "This program teaches everyone involved a little about themselves — myself included," she says. 



**Figure 5:** Tyler Maddox evaluates a canine patient. (Credit: Tufts University)

## ABOUT STEVE DALE

Steve Dale, CABC (certified animal behavior consultant) is host of two national pet radio shows and his heard on WGN Radio, Chicago. He's an author/contributor to many pet books, including editor of "Decoding Your Dog," author by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. He's been seen on many TV shows, from Oprah to the national DIY show "HouseSmarts TV," where he's a regular. He's on the Board of the Winn Feline Foundation and Human Animal Bond Association, and speaks at conferences around the world. His blog: [www.stevedale.tv](http://www.stevedale.tv).

