Tufts 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...
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.