It truly is amazing that I find myself giving this presentation, for many reasons. To be recognized by one’s peers is humbling. To know you are old enough to be considered is disconcerting. It does give one pause to go back over one’s career and life to consider how you arrive at this point. I have had several significant mentors over the years as I guess we all have. I want to accept this award in the name of Dr. John Williams, a charter diplomate who had a profound influence on my journey as a theriogenologist and as a person. Dr. Williams was the best theriogenologist that I have ever had the pleasure to work with. He was known best for his work with cattle, but he had significant knowledge in horses and dogs. He was the one to encourage me to pursue my expertise in canine theriogenology that proved to be wonderful advice for me and my career. We spent many hours talking about, not just veterinary medicine, but life in general. Anyone who was ever around Dr. Williams knows what a philosopher he was.

When I was accepted into veterinary school, there were not that many women in the profession. Now, the gender ratio in our veterinary schools is heavily weighted toward women and has been for many years. I have fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time in so many different situations. Yes, I have taken advantage of these opportunities but I’ve had many people that have been influential along the way.

I was the only one in my class that went into an exclusively equine practice upon graduation. Travis Collins was not one that you would think would be open to hiring a woman in 1977. He was a big guy from Mississippi, an Auburn graduate, and a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army Reserves. He was a member of the pistol team and always carried a gun in his truck. He hired me without reservation, and was glad to learn from a new graduate. He wanted me to carry a gun as well, but I had a Doberman and didn’t feel like I needed a gun. We practiced around Atlanta. Some of the situations I found myself, having money and drugs on the truck, could have been dangerous, but weren’t. My Doberman, Brigand, was a wonderful conversation piece and a total gentleman. I practiced for two years with Travis and gained much in those years in knowledge and experience. I am a firm believer that one makes a better academic veterinarian if you have had practice experience. A taste of the real world helps a professor to train veterinary students. I had been told by equine practitioners of the day that women could not do equine work. I guess we showed them. Travis was always willing to discuss cases and was a practical teacher, himself. It was a remarkable two years.

In 1979, I found myself needing to find another job. Our practice was the typical one and a half man practice, busy in the spring-summer, slow in the fall-winter. I called John Williams, my theriogenology professor at the University of Georgia. He was well known for being the guy who knew the veterinarians who were looking for jobs and those looking for associates. He asked me if I would be interested in a residency. The next thing I knew I was on my way back to Athens, Georgia.

The theriogenology residency at the University of Georgia was primarily a bovine practice. We had many dairies and beef herds that we served as well as performing numerous bull evaluations throughout the year. We did the equine work for the university horse program during the spring. The canine work was almost nonexistent. I loved my residency. I loved the bovine work, the dairy farmers, and most of all, I loved the students. I had found my niche: Teaching.

Our residency program included doing a Master’s degree simultaneously. I found that I loved being a student again. I decided on an antisperm antibody project that took advantage of all the bulls we saw for BSE’s. Dr. Donald Dawe became my major professor, as he was our immunologist on the faculty. I was comparing results of our standard BSE with the presence of antisperm antibodies in the bull’s serum. I learned the basics of research. I came up with the idea. I wrote the grant. I took the samples. I worked out the technique. I analyzed the results. I wrote the paper. In addition, I learned two things that were happenstance. 1. Bulls that were positive for leptospira had a higher incidence of
antisperm antibodies, and 2. My donor bull showed me that bulls do not mind being electroejaculated. He would actually come when I called, come into the chute, and stop to let me catch his head. So much for the animal welfare concerns about electroejaculation. I made an additional observation when I left Georgia to go to Virginia. When doing BSE’s on bull in Georgia, the usual pass rate for bulls was around 75%. When I arrived in Virginia, I found that the pass rate was much less. I realized that I was looking at a population of bulls that had not been selected for fertility. Dr. Williams had been helping farmers select for fertile bulls for many years in the area around Athens, Geo showed me the impact a theriogenologist can have in population medicine.

When I was finishing up my residency and Master’s degree, I started looking for my next job. I knew I wanted to teach which meant staying in academics. With only being board eligible, and having only a Master’s degree, the jobs were not readily forthcoming. Dr. Dawe approached me with an offer of a stipend that was specifically for a veterinarian to get a PhD. Dr. Williams said if I wanted to stay in academics, I would need a PhD. Wise words. And I had finally arrived at the point that someone was paying me to go to school.

Don Dawe was a clinical immunologist and loved to work on pigs. My PhD project became a pig project. We had an innovative pig farm just south of Athens, Georgia, that was open to letting us do research on their animals. It was a shower in – shower out total confinement operation. They had aerators in their lagoon that turned the waste processing into an aerobic process cutting down considerably on the odor the farm produced. They also used the water from the lagoon for drinking water for the sows, which was shown to cut down on the incidence of E. coli infections in the piglets. I looked at the immune function in the sows during all aspects of their reproductive cycle, including pregnancy and lactation. I also examined the effect of levamisole on the immune function of these sows. Levamisole was a common anthelmintic, but had shown some immunomodulating effects. I got really good at bleeding pigs and the various immunologic laboratory techniques of the day such as lymphoblast transformation and natural killer cell assays. Right in the middle of my research, we had a TGE outbreak at the farm. The pictures we were shown of wheelbarrows full of dead piglets in pathology became a reality. There is a reason they call it Re-search. An interesting result of this disaster became apparent as we processed the data. There were significantly fewer piglets lost in sows that had been given levamisole. You never know what projects might uncover.

After completing my PhD and passing my theriogenology boards, I was once again looking for a job. With these qualifications, the job search was easier. I decided to go to Virginia Tech, who wanted someone to do canine and equine theriogenology. My kind of job! During my time at Virginia Tech, I found the wisdom of being a comparative Theriogenologist. I have been able to apply principals and techniques across species lines that have helped me many times over the years.

As I made my way as a faculty member, I followed Dr. Williams’ advice and became active in veterinary associations. I started going to the local Southwest Virginia VMA meetings where I met a group of retired veterinarians who had been the movers and shakers of Veterinary Medicine in Virginia in their day. Duke Watson, Wilson Bell, Seymore Kalison to name a few. They were thrilled to have a faculty member become active in organized veterinary medicine. I became our delegate to the VVMA and eventually moved up the ranks to become President of the VVMA. I learned that the more you gave to your profession, the more you received back in satisfaction and friends throughout the state. Since many of the veterinarians around the state were Georgia graduates, we automatically had much in common. One accomplishment I still take satisfaction from is the merging of the VVMA’s annual meeting with the equine and bovine practitioners organizations in the state of Virginia. To this day, our annual meeting consists of all the veterinarians in the state getting together, regardless of their chosen species.

The other veterinary association I got involved with was the Society for Theriogenology, the SFT. I don’t think many know or remember we almost became the Society of Theriogenology. Fortunately Dr. Williams saved us from that fate of becoming the SOT’s. I served on the board and eventually became an officer, and then President of the SFT. Yes, I think I may be what they call a glutton for punishment, but
I developed friends from all over the country and the world. I encourage anyone to become involved in organized veterinary medicine. What you give, you get back many times over.

Another group of individuals that have been an important part of my professional life are my residents. My first resident was Niki Parker. Then Milan Hess, Kara Kolster, and Julie Cecere. I want to thank them for their presence in my life. It is another pleasure in life to pass on the torch.

I taught at Virginia Tech for a total of 27 years. I am now retired. My theriogenology training came in handy when I married a dairy farmer, Mac Wall. Wall Brothers Dairy is a 5 generation dairy on land that has been in the Wall family since 1739. Most dairy farmers don’t care much for horses, but Mac moved my horses over before he moved me over. I have been able to ride and breed a number of mares over the years. Between a dairy farmer and a theriogenologist, we think no uterus should go unused. I purchased my first Doberman in 1972. I have taken over from my old breeder, Jaima Youngblood, to breed my own line of Dobermans. I am working on my third generation of champions.

I want to thank you again for this honor. I am filled with gratitude for a professional life that has offered me so much.

I want to leave you with some words of wisdom from Dr. Williams. It is an example of the kind of a philosopher this man was. “A man is a fool to take a drink before he’s forty, and a fool not to after he’s forty.”