

Thank you.

The first time I was invited back to Cornell to speak was in 1988; a year after my colleagues and I published finding the cause and cure to the majority of cases of the most common and fatal feline heart disease -- dilated cardiomyopathy.

I was terrified -- 32, a year out of my residency, beginning my graduate work, coming home to lecture to my veterinary heroes, Gods, and parents.

Front row (Gods and heroes): Dr. D, John Cummings, Sharon Center. John Randolph, John King, Francis Fox.

Elsewhere in the room, my veterinary parents – those who nurtured and directed me during my years as a student and have continued to be there for me over the years: Bill Hornbuckle, Wayne Schwark, Robin Glead.

Not at that lecture, but influential over my life – including choosing Cardiology as my specialty – and ever present in my life to this day: Joel Edwards.

I begin with this story because if not for the generosity of the Cornell Alumni Association I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be standing here today.

You see, during my second year of veterinary school, the Cornell Alumni Association funded my grant proposal to study the pharmacokinetics of Verapamil in cats.

While writing the grant, a pathology resident, Greg Sykes, loaned me his files on heart disease. Several of the papers, which I thought totally irrelevant at the time, were about taurine in the heart.

My resident project at Davis was studying tPA in cats with clots. The first patient I entered into the study was a cat named El Blanco. The tPA dissolved his clot. But, unfortunately for him and his owner, El Blanco had DCM and he succumbed to CHF the next day.

The owner knew El Blanco was taurine deficient. That got me thinking about those papers on taurine.

Long story short, during the next week, 3 cases presented with DCM. Like El Blanco, they all had DCM, FCRD (an indication of prior or current taurine deficiency), a history of FUS, and were eating the same food. That seemed beyond coincidence. Those similarities motivated us to pursue the idea.

That was dumb luck! Only 1/3 of the cats we ultimately studied had similar findings and histories.

Had I not applied for the grant, I wouldn't have read those papers, and I likely would not have given the taurine deficiency a second thought.

I got through that talk in 1988 without wetting my pants. But, to my surprise several of my mentors were worried.

Basically they said, you're 32, we're proud, but how can you top this? What are you going to do next?

Looking back I understand their concern.

Back at Davis, my graduate committee mistakenly thought I'd be happy as a bench researcher. I loved the challenge of getting experiments to work, but I hated replicating results once I got it to work.

So, to fill the boring times, I, with Duncan Ferguson, who was then at the University of Georgia, answered pet owner questions on what was to become America Online, AOL.

That evolved into VIN – Veterinary Information Network.

Initially my friends thought I was crazy. Why would a veterinarian need a computer, no less a modem?

VIN is coming up on its 25th anniversary.

The VIN community is made up of around 53,000 colleagues worldwide. What I'm most proud of is that it is a community; a place where colleagues can find the information they need, help with their cases as well as comfort, support and collegiality.

I never intended it to be more than a hobby.

But as someone wise at Cornell first told me – and I tell students often – life is what happens to you while you are planning it.

And life has a way of happening.

During the dot.com bubble, VIN got caught up in the chaos. I honestly thought VIN couldn't survive with so many companies – many newly formed – with insane amounts of money -- \$10 million, \$20 million – trying to buy or kill VIN.

Most of those companies wanted to build their business on the backs of veterinarians. What they saw was if you get 1,000 veterinarians and they each have 1,000 clients, you have a million consumers to sell stuff to.

After receiving dozens of offers from these companies, a group of VINners got together in Denver. We discussed whether we should partner or likely die standing alone. We unanimously decided to remain independent, for and by veterinarians and go it alone.

That was also when we recognized it is impossible to answer to more than one master. Since colleagues are the master we desire to serve, we committed to VIN no longer accept advertising or sponsorship.

This left us with a problem. We needed a succession plan.

We needed a solution that would ensure that VIN would never be sold to an entity that would commercialize it.

Our initial plan was to find young people to pass it to for a fraction of the value. The problem with that idea was there was nothing to keep them from choosing to sell it to someone who would commercialize VIN.

The solution we came up with was to establish a nonprofit -- The VIN Foundation. A 501c3. Upon the death of myself and my partner, Nicky Mastin – VIN will go to the VIN Foundation.

I'm likely getting near the end of my allotted time, but I want to close by summing up what I see as the evolution many go through in their careers. It is the concept that directs the mission of the VIN Foundation.

When we start out, we are trying to figure out who we are and build our identity – it's about ME.

As we progress, we learn we get much more done collaboratively –it becomes about WE.

And as you get on in years, you realize that you've had your time and the most pleasure comes from helping ensure that the next generation has it as good or better than you did – it is about THEM.

It is that last part that I am worried about. I feel it is our duty to ensure that we leave to the next generation a profession that is better than the one we inherited.

We've made great progress scientifically and medically, but I think we've done a lousy job caring for the household.

We are leaving a mess for our young. That they graduate saddled with the equivalent of a mortgage is a shame upon us and burden upon them.

That the consolidation and corporatization of veterinary medicine is happening on our watch also concerns me. Not because it is bad or evil. But because I fear that practice corporatization and consolidation, combined with massive debt will leave many of our young with diminished opportunities and options.

Helping THEM – colleagues – as they face challenges over the course of their career from pre-vet to veterinary student to new graduate to young associate to associate deciding to enter ownership -- or not, to the colleague looking to transfer ownership – is the mission of the VIN Foundation.

Among those critical points in a career, I think none will have more influence on what this profession will look like in 20 years than how we transfer ownership.

I hope that unlike other professions, such as pharmacy, we find ways to ensure that our young always have options beyond choosing which big box store to work for.

I don't want to put a downer on this wonderful evening by focusing on the problems we face.

So, I'll end by sharing that UC Davis similarly recognized me as a distinguished alumnus a few years ago.

When the award was presented at a faculty event, the faculty booted me.

Why? Because in my remarks, I mentioned that when the dean called to tell me of the award, I responded that I was confused.

I was confused because I wasn't an alumnus of UC Davis. I went to a good veterinary school – Cornell.

Thank you!