

UF veterinary college honors donors, holds official dedication of new Small Animal Hospital

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GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Well-wishers gathered inside the festively decorated atrium of the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine's new Small Animal Hospital on Oct. 22 for a dedication and ribbon-cutting, which also recognized donors for their help in bringing the \$58 million project to fruition.

"The stars literally lined up," said college dean Glen Hoffsis, D.V.M., alluding to the many years of hoping, dreaming, talking and planning that had passed before the facility could finally open its doors.

"This building we're dedicating tonight was talked about by at least two deans before me," he said, adding as Florida's only veterinary college, UF serves an enormous population. "Over time, we'll need more veterinarians, and the old hospital facility was a choke point for our growth. We now have the ability to better serve both students and clinical faculty, and most importantly, the animals we care for."

He called the new hospital "the finest in the world" and thanked the many internal college and UF staff members, current and former administrators, architects, contractors, Florida's state veterinarian, the college's alumni council and the Florida Veterinary Medical Association, as well as state legislators for their support.

UF President Bernie Machen, who makes a rule of not visiting UF buildings while they are under construction, stood inside the hospital for the first time. He called it "an incredible moment." The new facility, he said, "takes your breath away."

Machen said his "favorite vet," his daughter, Maggie Machen, a 2009 UF veterinary college graduate, told him she only wished the new facility had been completed in time for her clinical rotations.

"Sixty percent of American households have pets," Machen said. "People think of their pets as families, and these facilities really are the nation's best."

He added that the UF veterinary college was one of the special attributes of the university.

"We can take care of pets that no one else can take care of," Machen said. "By allowing the college to expand enrollment and for all these other reasons, the new hospital is a wonderful addition to UF, but also to the county, the state and the nation."

Larry Cretul, outgoing Speaker of Florida's House of Representatives, said the event was one of his last official duties.

“Others have called this building the best in the world, and I’ll second that,” he said, adding that he had worked with UF for several years to support the project, which has long been on the Legislature’s radar screen.

“Today we take a major step forward,” Cretul said. “It’s no secret people love their pets, and from the standpoint of care, there is no better place than here. This new hospital is good for UF, good for the state and good for pet owners.”

University of Florida Board of Trustees member Danny Ponce officially accepted the building on behalf of the trustees.

“Nancy and I have had a couple of pets, including a Scottish terrier named Montana, who wouldn’t put her leg down after we returned home from a Florida-Georgia game,” Ponce said. “I brought her here to Dr. Dan Lewis, who, by the way, is the best veterinary orthopedic surgeon in the world. It turns out Montana had torn her left rear ACL (anterior cruciate ligament.) I had no idea dogs even had an ACL. Seven years later, she’s still doing well.”

In his introduction of David Guzick, M.D., Ph.D., senior vice president of health affairs and president of the UF&Shands Health System, Hoffsis noted the uniqueness UF enjoyed by virtue of being a part of such a major health center, and said the veterinary college faculty, and ultimately, hospital patients, benefited from the collaborations this synergy makes possible.

Guzick said Hoffsis was one of the first people who insisted on meeting with him after his hiring in 2009, “so that I would see the importance of having a veterinary center here at UF.” He added that two key areas stood out for him with the new small animal hospital project: philanthropy, and the project’s tie-in to the concept of one health.

“We have learned that we don’t just have a world-class facility here; we have a best-in-class facility here,” Guzick said. “Let’s put this in context. These haven’t exactly been the best of times in Florida, but in the last several years, people have come forward and said, ‘this is important.’”

After private gifts were raised, advocacy from the UF trustees, leveraged by the Legislature for an additional \$47 million, “was really important,” Guzick said.

Furthermore, the pathophysiology of diseases is similar in animals and humans, Guzick said.

“There truly is this ‘one health’ idea, and what better place to spearhead that idea on campus than right here,” he said. “Dr. Michael Schaer said to me earlier this evening, ‘This is a shooting star.’ Grab hold of it, and, congratulations.”

Jack Payne, Ph.D., senior vice president of agricultural affairs, and senior veterinary student Caty Love offered additional remarks before the ribbon was cut and guests spent the remainder of the evening touring the new building.