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Life chapters 'written' by a small town veterinarian

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Special to The Messenger

Some things in life are amenable to careful planning, but others simply defy the best efforts of mere people to manage.

That can happen when something is so surprising, so outlandish, so outside previous life experience or even so perfect in its own way and time that no human could possibly have written a better script.

Union City veterinarian Dr. Leland Davis has had experience with all such possibilities.

For instance, it came as a total surprise when he was asked to perform surgery on an ailing goldfish.

And no one ever suggested to him that he should be prepared for the outlandish necessity of giving anesthesia to a bearded dragon.

In fact, his youthful life experiences never included working out the best way to run a dog off a tree stand or out of a boat on purpose, either.

But all that and more has been part of Davis' life as a small-town Southern veterinarian and hunt test competitor.

And everything began, really, just because he wanted to get to know his dad better.

"Dad worked so much," says the son of the late Dr. George Davis — an Obion County veterinary legend. "To get to know him better, I started riding in the truck with him on calls. I'd go to the clinic with him at night, starting when I was around 7 years old and continuing until I went to college. I was with him one day and he had a dog with a broken pelvis. Dad operated on that dog that night and spent the night at the clinic with him. I watched him, and I could just see the compassion he had. He really cared. And I knew I wanted to do that. People didn't have a chance to see that side of my dad, but I recognized it early on.

"Dad was always going to classes and trying to improve himself. He invested in equipment before anyone else did in their practice. When Parvo (a serious canine virus that usually resulted in death) first came out, he went to great lengths to figure out ways to treat dogs."

In the home where young Leland Davis grew up, his father's vet practice was actually a family affair.

"Mom had to stay home and answer the phone at night or on weekends when Dad was out on call and then radio him (when people called with concerns about an animal that was important to them). Our whole family kind of grew up in it," he says.

Starting out in Alabama

Leland's father grew up in Montgomery, Ala., the son of a gifted photographer who was also the editor of that city's prestigious read-of-the-day. The journalist envisioned his son as a newspaperman, as well, and sent him to St. John's in Annapolis, Md., to learn the craft, but young Davis didn't share his father's passion. Instead, he convinced his parents that his future lay in pursuing science and working with animals.

After transferring to the former Alabama Polytechnical Institute — now known as Auburn University — George Davis earned a degree in veterinary medicine and then set out to complete an externship in the Middle Tennessee town of Clarksville. The Volunteer State attracted the young vet in more ways than one, so he accepted a job doing veterinary testing for the State of Tennessee when the externship was completed. He also fell in love with a pretty young Middle Tennessee girl from Erin, who just happened to be a cousin of the vet with whom he was working in the externship.

After the young sweethearts married, they moved to Humboldt briefly and then continued on to Union City in 1957, where they welcomed their first child — George Carlisle Davis Jr. That change of address came about because the late Dr. Alfred Creswell offered George a job in his veterinary practice — a respected entity that dated back to 1935 when the late Dr. O.B. Neely established his well-known animal clinic at 400 West Main St. in Union City.



Submitted photo

BRINGING HOME PRIZES — Union City veterinarian Dr. Leland Davis and his lab, Revi, show off a fourth-place win at the 2024 Super Retriever Series competition staged locally by the Tennessee River Hunting Retriever Club. They most recently took third place in the SRS earlier this month at Pepper's Pond in Conway, Ark., earning them the right to compete in the triple crown Super Retriever Series in Shreveport, La., in October. Davis says the competition at Pepper's Pond was a "big deal," but the upcoming event in Louisiana is a "huge deal." The pair take part in multiple hunt tests each year and the triple crown has been one of his goals.

"The clinic was built to help both small and large animals," Leland Davis says. "He had a barn out in the back, and he was really into horses. But he also had small animal cages built out of concrete with a drain for each one. They used to have the Tennessee Veterinary Medical Association meetings here because it was such a nice facility.

"Dr. Creswell came here in 1951 and Dr. Neely retired in 1953. Then Creswell exited the practice in 1975 when he retired and became the assistant state veterinarian."

Dr. Larry Buckles, who had moved to Obion County in 1970 when he joined the practice, became Dr. George Davis' new partner in '75, and the hospital became known as Davis & Buckles Animal Clinic.

By then, the Davis family had grown to five, with Leland's birth coming 18 months after his older brother's and 18 months before that of their sister, Paula (Davis) Wilson.

Writing his own story

"I graduated from high school in Union City in 1977 and went to UTM for three years. I applied then and got accepted to Knoxville in the new vet school. My class was the fifth class to graduate," Leland Davis says.

"Vet school was year-round for three years. After that, I left in 1983 and went to Columbia, S.C., to practice mainly equine medicine, but I actually did both small and large animals. I saw a lot of equine work in Columbia. The practice I was with was the only one around that did equine work.

"There were a lot of hunters and jumpers in Columbia, and we were near an off-season racetrack with quarter horses. The mayor there had a polo pony farm, and I got to be good friends with him. There were also a lot of thoroughbreds and lots of trainers for hunters and jumpers."

Meanwhile, the calendar moved on to 1984, and back in West Tennessee …

"I had a friend named Rob Ray who was looking for a job, and Dad hired him. He was hoping Rob would stay three or four years, but that didn't happen. So Dad told me, if you want to come home, you need to do it now."

When the new Dr. Davis came back to his hometown in 1984, he did not come alone.

He brought with him the college sweetheart he had married in 1981, the former Tajuana Childers, and their soon-to-be-born first child — a beautiful little girl they named Amy.

Union City was familiar territory for the new vet's wife. While Tajuana had spent several years of her childhood in Florida, she had returned in time to celebrate her high school years as an Obion County Central Rebel and had then moved on to UTM, where romance finally bloomed for the couple.

Three years after the little family settled back into their hometown rhythm, they welcomed a son, Matthew, who still lives locally and is a urologist.

Daughter Amy's childhood interest in taking care of horses had to be abandoned when she proved to be highly allergic to the animals, and today she lives in Murfreesboro with her family.

In December 1991, the Davis family and the local community suffered a loss when Dr. George Davis passed away, leaving the clinic he loved in the hands of his son and of his longtime partner, Dr. Buckles.

Dr. Keith Middlelbrook was part of the medical family by 1992, and the late Dr. Steven Crews came onboard next.

By 1999, a dream nurtured by everyone involved with the animal hospital came true. A new state-of-the-art facility was built at 402 West Reelfoot Ave. and the practice name was changed to Reelfoot Animal Hospital.

Today, Dr. Buckles is retired and Leland Davis is semi-retired, but he continues to do a lot of special procedures and he accepts referrals from other veterinarians. The veterinary practice to which his father devoted himself is still in excellent hands, he adds. Joining Dr. Middlebrook are Dr. Betsy Dugger, Dr. Mallory Allen, Dr. Marla Ferguson and new UT graduate Dr. Stone Craft, in addition to multiple veterinary technicians and vet assistants who are part of the expert team available at the animal hospital.

A call on his heart

While equine medicine still has high appeal for Leland Davis, he has found a particular passion in performing reproductive medicine and in tackling specialized and difficult surgeries. Those interests, and the skills he has learned and refined to practice them, have attracted the human owners of his patients from a wide geographical vista.

The patient log shows animals passing through the clinic from Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina and more.

"The thing that has changed the most since I started practicing in Union City is the quality of medicine and surgery we can offer. What we do now is a lot better than what we could have done back then — both the medicines and the new techniques," Dr. Davis says. "And a close second is the quality of the certified veterinary technicians graduating today.

"The surgery I was taught in school can still be done, but I've taken a lot of new courses and learned a lot of new techniques. You have to have the initiative for continuing education to learn. Anesthesia and monitoring are so much better now. We have five anesthesia machines and new lab equipment and both the people and all kinds of machines to monitor animals."

While the animal hospital practice is about 95 percent small animal-focused, Dr. Middlebrook makes good use of the large animal facility, cattle chute, cattle bin and the impressive animal surgery room behind the "new" hospital on Reelfoot Avenue.

"When Dad started, it (the practice) was about 40 percent small animals," Davis says. "Dad did large animals during the day and small animals at night. These days, ruptured cruciate ligament is the most common thing we see, and it's more common in dogs than cats. We actually call it a disease now, because it is so common. We also see a lot of bone fractures and surgeries."

And that surprising goldfish and outlandish bearded dragon … where do they fit into the story?

The vet explains: "I operated on a goldfish once. It was a fair-sized goldfish that had grown to a large size. Someone bet me I couldn't remove a tumor from the fish's head, so I researched anesthesia in goldfish. It took me two or three days to figure it out."

But then — even having accepted the challenge without an actual plan in mind — Dr. Davis educated himself, performed a pain-free surgery and got rid of the tumor for the finned patient.

"I once operated on a bearded dragon with a tumor in its side, too. That was fun — to give anesthesia to a bearded dragon using a 14-gauge IV catheter as a trachea tube," he recalls of another experience he never anticipated having.

"The surgery I do most often now is tibial plateau leveling osteotomy (TPLO). Dogs are ACL dependent, and the surgery makes them non-ACL dependent. (The anterior cruciate ligament stabilizes the knee joint.) When I first started out, I didn't see but one or two a year. It's usually the result of the dog rupturing it. The surgery is the gold standard because it makes dogs non-ACL dependent. I took a lot of classes about it, and I can usually do it within an hour and a half to two hours now. Not many vets do this. You usually have to go to see a specialist or to a university, because it's a harder surgery to do."

Davis says there are special joys in vet work: the animals (of course), the people who work with you in the practice and the human clients.

"Seeing some of their great compassion and the trust they have in you," he says of the latter, "that's so important."

He also has a warm spot for young people with an interest in helping animals. But that doesn't mean he coddles them.

"I push kids hard," he says of those who spend time doing hands-on learning at the animal hospital. "Life isn't a bunch of lollipops, and we've all got to learn to get over our problems. I've had students come through that I thought would never make it, and they turned out great. Others that I thought would be great changed their minds about their future. Working with animals can be so therapeutic for kids, but some are really good and some just aren't. You don't know until you try. Lots of them have really touched my heart.

"My advice for kids who are thinking about becoming vets is this: Go shadow a vet and see what it is like. UTM has a veterinary technician program, and a lot of people get their class work there, but they still need to work at a veterinary clinic. That's the key."

Beyond the sick room

Now here's that thing about running a dog off a tree stand or out of a boat on purpose. Those practices have become part of a second passion in Dr. Davis' life.

It started in the late 1990s with an interest in training and running labs and a special dog of his own named Katie.

"I started running her in hunt tests and got a hunter and retriever champion," he says with pride.

Hunt tests, according to the American Kennel Club, are events in which "Judges score dogs on their natural ability to mark and remember a fall, on their hunting style, perseverance or courage."

Before Davis knew it, he was approached by two enthusiasts from Paris who told him the Tennessee River Hunting Retriever Club was about to fold in their community, and they wanted to move the club to Union City in hopes of increasing membership and having hunt tests.

"That was when Final Flight Outfitters (a well-known Obion County outlet for hunting gear) was starting out, and we had our first tests on their farm grounds. Now we have a Fall Test there every year," he says. The majority of the participants come from outside the immediate area, with some traveling four to six hours or more to compete.

"We have three hunt tests — in the fall at Final Flight, in the spring at Quail Haven (located on Reese Alexander Road outside Union City) and in the summer at Halls, because it's a different kind of hunt ground, and we don't have a lot of usable hunting grounds in Obion County."

The prestigious Super Retriever Series was hosted locally by the Tennessee River HRC, of which Davis is a member, April 25-27. One of the competitions is called a Hunt Test Savvy and it involves "tricks" like seeing how a dog will perform if it is required to run off a tree stand or out of a boat.

Davis knows a lot about stuff like that now, although it wasn't something he planned to qualify for earlier in life.

That knowledge, however, is a natural outgrowth of his personal world that is full of animals. He loves everything about that — keeping them healthy to begin with, restoring them to health when sickness or injuries occur and establishing unique bonds with them — bonds like the ones that are encouraged by the competitions he enjoys taking part in and hosting.

There is one last part of the story about things he simply couldn't plan for, though. And it is the most important part. It is a chapter about something so perfect in its own way and time that no human could possibly have envisioned a better result or penned a "love"lier script.

It has a simple title: "Family."

It is about his wife, Tajuana; his children and their spouses, Amy and Will McAdoo and Dr. Matthew and Sloane Davis; and his six precious grandchildren, Marley and Millie McAdoo and Marigeorge, Worth, Shepherd and Julianne Davis.

They fill his vet's heart to overflowing.

Just ask him.

Dr. Leland Davis will tell you all about them.

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