

FEATHERS AND FUR

CALS alumna educates pet parents, cares for exotic animals

BY ERIN BUCKLEY

DR. KAREN EMERSON knows a thing or two about helping people take care of their animals. The poultry science alumna has been educating families and individuals about animal health for nearly 18 years. Her specialty—exotic pets—makes her clinic, Emerson Animal Hospital in West Point, one of the few clinics in the region that cares for extraordinary animals.

Her interest in birds drew her to pursue a degree in poultry science. Upon graduation in 2002, she continued her education at the MSU College of Veterinary Medicine where she earned a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. After graduation, she worked with several veterinarians and a mentor for seven years before opening her own private practice in 2014.

Before even opening her clinic, Emerson reached out to local CBS-affiliated news station WCBI in hopes of hosting an educational feature on the station's morning show. Her goal was to educate families, individuals, and other veterinarians about animal health and ways to take care of their pets. She has been featured on the WCBI morning show twice a week for the last 10 years.

“Our goal is to bring someone in and educate and communicate with them, so that they understand why we're doing what we're doing for their animal. That was one of my big goals and I've achieved that with WCBI. Now, I've also been featured on the CW and Fox News, and we just won Clinic of

the Year for the ninth year in WCBI's Viewer's Choice Awards. Those segments really reach people because I've had people contact me from all over. The *New York Times* flew out here and did a photoshoot of me with a snake a couple years back. That was a really cool experience.”

Individuals from across the state visit her hospital for exotic pet care. A few of the unusual pets she has treated include exotic birds (her favorite), guinea pigs, kangaroos, and geckos. Perhaps the most unusual pet she treated was an axolotl. These unique amphibians can regenerate limbs and even parts of their brain when needed. They remain in a larval state for their entire life, meaning they don't undergo metamorphosis like other amphibians. Emerson was prepared to perform surgery on a pet axolotl that ate a plastic plant, but, thankfully, the critter passed it on its own.

“We do a lot of out-of-the-box stuff. I've worked with kangaroos, snakes, and many birds. There are hardly any exotic vets here. I've tried to create a hospital where we can do a lot more than just your standard vaccines. I have people come here from Jackson, Meridian, and as far as Alabama and Tennessee, too.”

Emerson's journey to success in her own practice has not been without its challenges. She says being the veterinarian isn't necessarily the hardest part, but rather the many roles that come with owning a business. She shares that while her studies at MSU prepared her

to be a veterinarian, she didn't exactly realize what she was getting into opening a private clinic. With help from her husband and support from a wonderful staff, she found her way and opened Emerson Animal Hospital.

“It was challenging at times because not only did I have to be the veterinarian, but I also had to fulfill the roles of human resource manager, employer and landlord, which can all be a little overwhelming. I always recommend that students work under a mentor before opening their own practice. It helped prepare me for what I'm doing now.”

Emerson has a great relationship with MSU's College of Veterinary Medicine. She provides employment opportunities for MSU veterinary medicine students and currently has a student completing an externship at the clinic. In addition to serving as a referral center for individuals seeking exotic pet care, Emerson Animal Hospital also performs extensive surgeries that some other clinics do not, such as soft tissue and knee surgeries.

“I love what I do. I'm really in to bettering our profession and trying to help our profession grow. One thing that I think really stands out is my view of educating the clients better and helping veterinarians gain confidence in their profession. My main goals in opening this practice were to spread better education to clients and offer the best quality of veterinary medicine at a reasonable price, and I think we've accomplished that.” 🐾

Dr. Karen Emerson. (Photo by David Ammon)

