

# 2017 Award Winners' Interviews

/ Jim Bell



## H. Don Mahan Award Winner Sees Herself as an Educator

If there is one theme that has always been a part of the career of Dr. Bernadine Cruz, it is education. This year's H. Don Mahan Award winner – an associate veterinarian at Laguna Hills Animal Hospital – has delivered pitches on television aimed at both pet owners and her fellow veterinarians and she currently is doing a weekly podcast that has 700,000 subscribers.

"People have asked, 'What would you have done if you hadn't become a veterinarian,'" she said in an interview. "And I've always said I would have become an educator. And then I step back and I say: 'Well, I am an educator. That is really my passion.' In the various public relations campaigns I've done for veterinary medicine, going out and speaking to colleagues, speaking to pet owners – it's really about educating them."

Her podcast, she said, "is just me chatting with experts in the field of veterinary medicine and [animal] behavior. I've learned so much doing it and I hope people listening in are also getting an education. It seems like they must be because they keep coming back."

The podcast has matched well with another of her passions: travel. When she is abroad, as she was recently in Costa Rica, she said, I see if I can tie in [to her podcast] I will either record a podcast there and then or set one up when I return to the states. I try to emphasize to my listeners that it is all about One World, One Health, One Medicine."

Dr. Cruz has made appearances on commercial television and she is one of the hosts for PetCARE TV, a streaming

channel that goes into the waiting rooms of about 2,000 practices in the United States. "It's veterinarians talking about various topics. It's a way of entertaining and educating pet owners as they wait to see their veterinarian."

Dr. Cruz has had clients come into the examination room and ask her if their pet was overweight after seeing a talk on TV about overweight pets – not realizing that she was the veterinarian who had offered the televised advice. Others have asked: "Is that you on TV?"

"We [PetCARE TV] started in 1998," she said, "and I've gone through various permutations of hair over the years so sometimes they don't realize it's me. There are good hair days and bad hair days."

Dr. Cruz was presented with the prestigious Mahan award at the SCVMA's annual Celebration at the Hyatt Regency in Long Beach on January 28. The honor goes annually to a person who has served organized veterinary medicine in an extraordinary manner. It was presented by Allyne Moon, RVT and member of the Board of Trustees.

Ms. Moon described Dr. Cruz as "a fantastic veterinarian and a fantastic woman. I worked with her eight or nine years ago

12

FEBRUARY 2017 \ PULSE

at Laguna Hills Animal Hospital. And it was just a joy. She let me do what I had been trained to do and studied to do. A lot of doctors want to do all the technical aspects themselves. But she lets her RVT staff do what they are meant to do. It's such a joy to have somebody who is confident in you and in whom you are confident and have a trusting relationship. I really love that she has been able to elevate veterinary medicine the way she has. She has been instrumental in helping the industry improve its image."

Dr. Cruz said that work in a practice is a team effort. "Registered veterinary technicians and certified veterinary technicians are the soul of the practice because they are where the doctor can't be. I think of them as my eyes and ears and hands. They know the pets better than I do because they're with them. I depend on them tremendously."

She is "very honored, very humbled that I have been given this award and if I can somehow pay it forward, that's what I'm here for. It's about the profession – it's not about me."

Dr. Cruz earned her DVM degree from UC Davis in 1982. She grew up in the Los Angeles area and attended Cal State LA. The young Dr. Cruz did an internship at Grand Avenue Pet Hospital in Santa Ana,

one of the first referral hospitals in Southern California.

Dr. Chuck Acton was chief of staff at Grand Avenue when Dr. Cruz was there. In 1986, she joined him at Laguna Hills Animal Hospital.

"It was just Acton and me across a partner's desk. It was one of the best ways for a young veterinarian to learn about medicine, customer service and business," Dr. Cruz said. "I could watch him in action and really learn from him. I was very glad I had such an awesome mentor. I told him when I started I was going to be here for five years. I tell him now that I am very bad at math and that's why I'm still here."

As a child, Bernadine was influenced by the boyfriend of a sister who was 11 years older. The boyfriend later became a surgeon. "I was in love with him and looked up to him from the time I was little and still do. So when I entered college I intended to become an MD. But I realized after taking a few courses that human medicine is kind of boring. You only get to take care of [human] males and females – large, small and variations on the theme. By becoming a veterinarian, I could be the pediatrician, the gerontologist, the surgeon, the behaviorist – and I got to play with puppies and kittens

and it was just spectacular. I never regretted it at all and highly recommend the field of veterinary medicine because there are so many opportunities out there."

Today, Dr. Cruz lives a full and happy life. She has an adult daughter who is a registered nurse at a regional breast cancer surgery center in Kalispell, Mont. The daughter, Melissa, has three daughters of her own. "I'm very proud of all of them," Dr. Cruz said. Her granddaughters "do well in school and they're fish in the [swimming] pool. The youngest has state [best] times in her age group. Maybe someday I'll see her in the Olympics."

Dr. Cruz is not Melissa's birth mother. As a teenager, Melissa was a volunteer at Laguna Hills Hospital. "She was just stellar," Dr. Cruz said. "So we hired her for weekends and then on summer break. But she had a major falling out with her natural mother and she came to live with me and we became closer and closer. When she got married, I was the honorary mother of the bride. And when she had babies, I was always introduced as the grandmother."

"Now we have made it official through the court system. She is now my kid. I have a fantastic daughter and three grandchildren who are just spectacular." P