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The Drake Center Prescribes Education for Young Wannabe Veterinarians

Little animal lovers gain an inside perspective on veterinary medicine and pet care at the clinic's Kids' Day event.

By GENEVIEVE SUZUKI (Open Post)

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lives up to its slogan: "For people whose pets are part of the family."

The warmly decorated clinic, recently named Best Veterinary Practice in San Diego for 2011 by Ranch & Coast Magazine, proudly displays wall photos of the veterinarians, center employees, clients and their furry kids, offering kind reassurance in a family-friendly atmosphere.

In addition to employing a top-notch cheery staff, the clinic also prioritizes community outreach, such as its Kids' Day, an event started this past year. Interested children are offered an insider's view of the veterinary practice while staff members educate young pet owners on proper animal care.

On Sunday afternoon, a handful of such budding veterinarians and their parents waited patiently for their chance to tour the center.

Receptionist Jackie Armstrong began the tour by taking the school-aged kids over to a dog scale and asking them why they think a veterinarian needs to weigh the animals. Answers varied, but were surprisingly savvy for such young attendees.

Several kids said it was to monitor obesity in pets. Armstrong applauded their knowledge before explaining further: "We have to know how much they weigh so we can give them enough medicine. And we need to know they're growing appropriately when they're puppies."

The next stop along the tour was one of several examination rooms in which the kids were shown various x-rays of pet patients. One little boy asked why it was on a monitor rather than printed out. Armstrong smoothly replied: "It used to be on flimsy paper, but that stuff can get lost, and that's no good."

Because this was a Kids' Day event, kid comments were aplenty. While Armstrong showed the group an X-ray of a dog's belly containing a cell phone wire, a little girl said loudly, "Hey, my feet

are dirty!"

Not missing a beat, Armstrong said, "Well, this is a veterinary center, where we see lots of animals, so it's OK to be a little dirty."

Other X-rays were sobering reminders of how attentive owners must be to their pets. Armstrong pointed out abnormalities in a puppy's paw that were caused by a heavy Christmas ornament falling on the pooch.

There was also an X-ray of a dog that swallowed a ball. "We have dogs who eat rocks and all sorts of ridiculous stuff," said Armstrong, who advised the kids to keep small objects away from pets to avoid such occurrences, which often lead to surgery for the animals.

Still, the kids were rewarded for their efforts when they were treated to an X-ray of a pregnant dog. Armstrong explained that they count heads and spines to figure out how many puppies are in a litter. She then showed a mini-photo album of the dog and her newborn pups.

"Are they cuter inside or outside?" she asked.

"Outside!" the kids cheered.

After viewing X-rays, the children followed Armstrong to the back of the clinic to see the operating tables, boarding areas and sophisticated equipment also found at hospitals for people.

Veterinarian and founder Michele Drake used her standard poodle, Phoebe, to demonstrate how she'd examine a patient. Before starting, however, she reminded her young wards to always wash their hands.

As Drake went through a standard examination, students

watched in awe. She went over why it's important to feel for lumps in animal patients and what a heart should sound like. "What we're listening for are abnormal heartbeats," she said.

Drake said veterinarians do three things: Diagnose, prescribe and perform surgery. "That's why we go to school for 18 years," she said.

Drake said she always knew she wanted to be a veterinarian. "Wish somebody had done this for me when I was a kid," she said.

The Drake Center goes beyond the one-hour tour to offer opportunities to older students who want a career in veterinary care. They hire high school students and feature externships through La Costa Canyon High School.

"Quite a few kids go off to vet school after working here," she said.

Before the tour ended, the kids went back to an examination room to learn about proper dental care for pets from vet technician Cathy Wheeler. "Who brushes their teeth?" she asked the students.

After a chorus of "me, me, me," Wheeler then asked the kids what they thought about brushing their teeth with seafood.

"Ewww," they said, wrinkling their noses.

"What about brushing your teeth with chicken?"

"Ewww," they said again.

Wheeler then explained that while it sounds distasteful to us, it's delicious to our pets and promotes healthy oral hygiene. As she distributed several models of animal teeth for kids to touch and

hold, she talked to them about how humans and animals differ when it comes to tooth count.

In the end, the Drake Center gave each child a free stuffed puppy, prompting happy smiles on young faces.

Kirsten Quanbeck, whose 8-year-old daughter, Sofia, attended the behind-the-scenes tour thanked Wheeler for the time the center contributed to her child's interest and education.

"That was great," Quanbeck said, putting her arm around Sofia. "We're all set to be a vet now."

For more information about Kids' Day at The Drake Center, check out the Encinitas Patch page.

PHOTO GALLERY



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