

Mizzou Wire

Related links

- [College of Veterinary Medicine](#)

Dog's best friend

Mizzou's Jimi Cook is named America's best vet

Story by Lisa Bruce Photo by Josh Nichols Published: April 25, 2008



Veterinarian Jimi Cook doesn't just treat dogs; he will raise Vegas, a service dog, until the dog is a little over a year old. Then Vegas will be sent for more training and placement with a person who needs him.

What does it take to be America's best veterinarian? Michael Ray knows, but he's not a veterinarian.

Ray's service dog, a golden retriever named Eagle, started to show lameness in his left front leg in 2005. In the summer of 2006, Mizzou veterinarian James "Jimi" Cook donated his time and services to help Eagle.

Eagle made a full recovery and accompanies Ray, who is partially paralyzed, everywhere.

Ray nominated Cook in the "Thank Your Vet for a Healthy Pet" contest sponsored by the Morris Animal Foundation, Merial Limited and BowTie, Inc. More than a thousand people from all over the U.S. wrote essays. Cook, associate professor of small animal surgery and director of the Comparative Orthopaedic Laboratory at Mizzou, received the award on Feb. 19 at the Western Veterinary Conference in Las Vegas.

Cook says donating his time and skills to help Eagle and Ray was an easy choice. “His spirit and kind nature came through to me in our preparatory e-mails and phone calls,” Cook says. “He has been through so much in his life, and yet his first and only goal was to help Eagle, his companion, get better. I knew I had to make this work.”

The admiration is mutual. “I’m in awe of the man,” Ray says. “He’s got a heart as big as anybody I’ve ever known.”

Ray and Eagle’s story



Eagle gets post-operative care after surgery to correct problems that caused lameness in his leg. *Photo courtesy of Sarah Carey, University of Florida.*

In 1978, Ray was paralyzed in an accident. He has the use of his arms and walks therapeutically with crutches, but he spends most of his time in a wheelchair.

Eagle primarily retrieves “anything he can pick up” for Ray. Eventually, the dog will be trained to pull Ray’s chair, turn lights on and off, and assist with other tasks.

At first, no one could determine what made Eagle lame. Ray took him to the University of Florida (UF) College of Veterinary Medicine. Eagle’s doctor had just read a paper by Cook and, after examining Eagle, determined the dog had a shoulder problem that could be treated using a surgical technique pioneered by Cook.

But the surgery Eagle needed had never been done at UF, and the \$2,200 price tag was prohibitive for Ray.

Luckily, on his regular visits to the grocery store with Ray, Eagle made a lot of friends. A woman overheard Ray discussing his situation with one of the store workers, and she connected him with H.E.L.P. Animals, Inc. The organization agreed to pay Cook’s travel expenses to Florida. Ray took a chance and e-mailed Cook to ask if he’d be willing to come. Cook donated his skills and time, and he shared his

techniques with colleagues at UF while he was there.

Surprises

Cook went to Las Vegas for the Western Veterinary Conference in February to receive the “best vet” award. He didn’t know an extra surprise awaited him.

Cook and wife Cristi, also a veterinarian, had signed up to raise puppies for the organization where Ray got Eagle. Eagle and Ray, along with Janet Severt, founder of New Horizons Service Dogs, traveled to Nevada to surprise the Cooks with their first service puppy. Ray hid until the announcement of Cook’s award.

“It was something. We totally surprised him. He said it was one of the best days of his life,” Ray says.

And, thanks to Cook, Eagle enjoys some of the best days of his life with Ray.

Read more in: [Family & Community](#), [Health & Medicine](#), [Beyond Campus](#)

Reader feedback

Let Mizzou Wire know what you think

E-mail the editor at MizzouWire@missouri.edu with your comments or questions. *Note: If published, feedback may be edited for length, style and clarity.*

Published by [MU Web Communications](#), 265 McReynolds Hall, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone: 573-884-8075 | Fax: 573-884-8074 | MizzouWire@missouri.edu

Copyright © 2008 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and other [copyright information](#).

An [equal opportunity/affirmative action](#) institution.

Last updated: April 25, 2008