

A detailed anatomical illustration of a human heart, rendered in black and white with fine line work. The heart is the central focus, with its major vessels and coronary arteries clearly visible. It is surrounded by several large, stylized flowers in shades of purple, pink, and blue. The background is a soft, light blue wash with scattered splatters of red, purple, and blue ink, giving it a vibrant, artistic feel.

THE HEART OF MEDICINE

 Sarah Ryan  Billy Babb  Kellen Bakovich

Lily Davis worked her whole life to become a veterinarian, but once she joined the D.V.M. Class of 2021 she felt fear, isolation, and anxiety. “I struggled so much,” Davis says. “I used to feel confident, but if I had a question, then immediately, my heart was in my throat. I was sweating. I couldn’t imagine asking a question. I didn’t feel like myself anymore.”

Davis began searching for a way to navigate depression and stay in school. Then she heard about an elective called The Healer’s Art. She heard it was a good place to connect – with herself and her peers – and to talk about mental health. In the first session of the course, the facilitator asked everyone to draw an aspect of their identity they felt like they couldn’t bring to veterinary school. Davis drew a classroom full of little green stick figures. All of them were answering a question, except one. Davis’s stick figure had a thought bubble with the answer, but she had lost her voice.

THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

The Healer’s Art was created by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen to explore human dimensions of medicine that are typically overlooked in medical training. It is now taught at more than 100 medical schools in the United States and internationally, but there was nothing comparable in veterinary education until Jane Shaw, professor of veterinary communications, sought to bring the course to Colorado State University.

Shaw’s decision was prescient. Nearly a decade would pass before the Centers for Disease Control and Preven-

tion released a 2019 study documenting a suicide epidemic in veterinary medicine, but the alarm bells were already ringing. Shaw saw that students and alumni were struggling with work-life balance and wellness. As director of the Veterinary Communication for Professional Excellence program, she was developing a curriculum to prepare students to offer relationship-centered care, but VetComm was not enough.

Shaw hoped that Healer’s Art would help veterinary students develop the skills and resources they need to approach wellness as a process of lifelong learning. “We are always evolving, so wellness is a dynamic process,” Shaw says. “Wellness needs to be an everyday focus, just like communication.”

Shaw joined forces with Camille Torres-Henderson, professor of clinical

sciences, and Laurie Fonken, director of DVM Health and Wellness Programs, to bring Healer’s Art to CSU. In 2012, CSU became the first veterinary school in the country to offer the elective. Since then, Shaw and Fonken have helped faculty implement the course at nine other veterinary schools. A decade has passed since they introduced the course to veterinary education, but its power to transform the lives of students and facilitators is needed now more than ever.

A CHANGE OF HEART

Shaw and Fonken recruited Sam Romano (D.V.M., ’83) to be one of the original Healer’s Art facilitators at CSU. Romano exudes calm and lights up the room with his smile. Nothing about his peaceful demeanor belies his history of depression and anxiety, but he doesn’t hesitate to talk about the struggle. After 15 years of emergency medicine and the death by sui-

cide of two colleagues, Romano was in a severe state of burnout.

“I felt constant anxiety, which subsequently turned into post-traumatic stress disorder,” Romano says. Romano wasn’t sure where to turn, so he came back to CSU to connect with Shaw and Fonken. They encouraged Romano to engage in the VetComm curriculum and Healer’s Art. Romano became a dedicated facilitator and mentor, and he believes that service at the intersection of communication and connection saved his life.

“It is not an overstatement to say that had I not reengaged with the college, I really doubt I would be sitting here today,” Romano says. “I don’t know what that would mean exactly. It might mean divorce, serious substance abuse, or not being here at all. I don’t dwell on that. I’m just grateful that I have the opportunity to engage with students. It’s an incredible gift, and I never take it for granted.”



The Healer’s Art helped Melissa Terry and Lily Davis learn to thrive in veterinary medicine through the practice of wholehearted listening and sharing.

For Romano, Healer’s Art was an integrated approach to recovery. As he engaged in the curriculum, he had to learn the self-care skills – sharing, listening, acceptance, mindfulness, and wholeness – that he was trying to teach.

“As a facilitator, you can’t give away what you don’t have,” Romano says with a wry grin. “In an average career, you’ll have potentially 200,000 interactions with clients. We talk about how we communicate with others, but how do you communicate things to yourself? How do you frame what you’re seeing and doing to yourself? It’s really hard to separate the two things. You can’t pretend to care about others without somehow having your heart there.”

SOWING THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

On a cold and snowy night in Fort Collins, 10 veterinarians and faculty members gather in front of a blazing fire in Shaw’s living room. They have come together to prepare to teach The Healer’s Art. The curriculum consists of four topics – Wholeness, Grief and Loss, Mystery and Awe, and Service – but more than anything, the course is built from the stories of the people in the room.

“The course consists of storytelling and connecting through real experience,” Fonken explains. “It’s not something you can teach didactically. It’s a discovery model.” Each session begins with a facilitator’s seed story on the night’s topic. Then, the class divides into small discussion groups of five students and one facilitator. The facil-

itators prepare for the course by practicing the art of wholehearted sharing and listening. Tonight, Shaw and Romano sit across the circle from Julia Brannan. Brannan is also one of the original facilitators and a former CSU faculty member. She gives tonight's seed talk on Mystery and Awe.

"Mystery and awe is everywhere. Every time I drive into the mountains and see a tree growing out of a rock, I'm like, 'How is that possible?'" Brannan says. "Mystery and awe really energizes you because you're connected to something so much bigger than yourself."

Brannan's favorite tale of mystery and awe draws on her experience delivering 15 puppies on Christmas Eve with the help of a ragtag group of volunteers, but she assures her audience that if you're looking for mystery and awe, you'll find it everywhere. Sure enough, after a bit of silent reflection, the group shares stories on myriad subjects: monarchs and

environment and personality can combine to create a spiral of anxiety and stress.

"Our students have worked for most of their lives to get here," Fonken says. "We tell them they can relax a bit now, but they've never done that. There's a lot of support for them here, but they hesitate to ask for help. They are highly motivated achievers, and the curriculum is intense. They begin to compare how they feel on the inside to how everyone else looks on the outside, and then they feel like they're not meant to be here. There is a lot of imposter syndrome, a lot of perfectionism, and fear of vulnerability. In Healer's Art, students get to learn about and see each other in a way that is not offered anywhere else in the curriculum."

The course creates a safe space where students can bring their whole selves to the table and learn who to trust. The process helped Davis recover her voice – and her sense of self. "I felt so validated. It gave me the confidence to start piecing things together and moving forward," Davis says. She spoke up more in classes. She made honest connections with her classmates. And she discovered that she was carrying baggage she didn't know she had.

"Grief and loss was a roller coaster," Davis says. "I had just put down my own animal two months prior, but I was moving so quickly I couldn't process it. Processing it there with my group was really powerful and needed to happen. It was painful and scary, but I thank God I did it now instead of in 10 years."

Davis's classmate, Melissa Terry, was also struggling to thrive in veterinary school. She came to CSU because she connected deeply with animals. Ironically, the culture of veterinary education, particularly the emphasis on testing and perfectionism, threatened her human-animal bond.

"I felt disconnected, like we were all kind of robots," Terry recalls. "I came to vet school because I felt so strongly connected to animals, and I wanted to connect with people who understood that, who understood that there's so much more to me than just the scientist."

Terry's Healer's Art group was very supportive

when she opened up about her struggles with depression and anxiety. "It was really powerful to know there are people here I can trust," she remembers. She also learned to integrate her human-animal bond into her education and work in a way that has changed her experience in vet school.

"I learned from this class that the ability to feel so strongly for animals is a gift and not something to squash," Terry says. "Acknowledging and feeling compassion for the animal and the client is so important. It is one of the most powerful, beautiful experiences I've had, and how lucky am I to be able to bring compassion and emotion to medicine in a healthy way?"

THE GARDEN OF HEALING

Every session of The Healer's Art is as unique as the people in the room and their reasons for being there, but the course unequivocally works.

"We talk a lot about wearing masks. You come to vet school and put your mask on," Shaw says. "This is a setting where we take our masks off and let our colleagues see who we are. It personalizes our colleagues because we hear their stories. We hear some of their deepest struggles and pains. We come to appreciate how resilient and strong they are. And then we also recognize that this is someone I can go to when I struggle."

There is no single solution to the mental health crisis in the veterinary profession, but connection, vulnerability, and wholeness – the skills that students and facilitators practice in Healer's Art – are essential to thriving in a career that can be emotionally and financially challenging.

For now, only 30 students per year have the opportunity to take this elec-

WELLNESS RESOURCES FOR VETERINARY STUDENTS

CSU's proactive approach to wellness in veterinary education begins with orientation and continues long after the D.V.M. hooding ceremony. "We understand that the transition to veterinary school is very difficult," says Melinda Frye, associate dean for veterinary academic and student affairs. "In addition to Healer's Art, the DVM Counseling and Wellness Program mobilizes many robust resources to support our students."

- D.V.M. orientation helps students connect with each other through a variety of teambuilding activities, educates students on well-being resources, and promotes self-advocacy and help-seeking behaviors.
- Individual, couple, and group counseling are offered at no cost to students in the DVM Program. Services are confidential and offered at times that complement the D.V.M. student schedule.
- Students have full access to the CSU Health Network Counseling Services and psychiatric services as well as groups offered through the Health Network.
- Each D.V.M. class has a well-being representative or committee. The director of the DVM Counseling and Wellness Program works directly with the committee to develop requested programs and presentations.
- D.V.M. students participate in the college's Committee on Resilience and Engagement, which offers programs and initiatives to promote well-being.
- Laurie Fonken, director of the DVM Counseling and Wellness Program, consults with students, faculty, and staff on how to address well-being in self and others on an as-needed basis.
- Faculty-led exercise groups promote healthy breaks from busy days as well as engagement between students and faculty.
- Career Issues Groups, developed through the CSU Women in Science Network, facilitate open dialogue on matters of gender and professionalism among students and faculty.

Keep a pulse on yourself. Be aware of what you need and what your limitations are. It's perfectly wonderful to have limitations, and that's not what we're taught.

– Lily Davis

milkweed pods; the body's ability to heal; overcoming cancer; lost teeth; and surly teenagers. These are the moments that take your breath away, the miracles and coincidences that can't be explained. As they talk, there is a feeling in the room that everything we need is there, and we are all needed. It is a feeling of abundance and connection.

THE FRUIT OF COMPASSION

Abundance and connection are not typical elements of any veterinary school experience. Fonken, who has counseled D.V.M. students for more than a decade, has a firsthand understanding of the way en-

tive, but CSU's veterinary program is undergoing a curriculum renewal process that could change that. The multiyear discussion about what skills a veterinarian needs to be successful on Day One has produced curriculum goals that include modeling growth mindsets and developing a sense of professional identity and community.

The Healer's Art – or the skills and process it teaches – could become a core component in the DVM Program. If so, it may initiate a culture shift in veterinary medicine, a wave of wellness and resilience with the potential to save the lives of veterinarians and animals. ■