"People want their pets to have the same medical care they receive. I think we'll see more specialties in veterinary medicine."

—Cynthia Smith, D.V.M. '80
Creatures Great and Small: Cynthia Smith, D.V.M. ’80

President/owner, Animal Hospital of Putnam, CT

Dr. Cynthia “Cindi” Smith ’80 maintains an “open-door” policy when it comes to accepting new patients. "I see pretty much whatever can fit through the door," said Smith, a doctor of veterinary medicine. She also is president and owner of the Animal Hospital of Putnam in Connecticut.

While dogs and cats make up the bulk of her small animal hospital's patient census, the occasional goat has popped up among her appointments. Also, she sees what she calls "pocket pets," which include hamsters, gerbils and Guinea pigs, as well as patients that scurry, hop and slither their way into her waiting room.

Career planning for life
A Worcester native, Smith grew up in a house full of people with allergies, so she spent her formative years without what she wanted most, pets. Even without a dog or cat of her own, she knew as a child what she wanted to be when she grew up. At 16, she started working as a veterinary assistant at an animal clinic in Worcester, a job she was able to keep during her undergraduate years. As she looks forward to her 30th reunion this fall, she fondly remembers her reasons for attending Assumption and her experiences at the College.

"I had great professors. Dr. Eugene Byrnes made a really big impression on me. I’ve kept in touch with him and I support the scholarship named in his honor.” – Cynthia Smith ’80

“My brother, Alan, went to Assumption and graduated in the Class of 1979,” she said. “He went on to Boston University in dentistry. I could see from his experience that Assumption offered a very good science program, so I followed him to campus.

“I had great professors. Chemistry Professor Eugene Byrnes, in particular, made a really big impression on me. He was an excellent teacher and more. When the Pope was coming to visit the U.S., Dr. Byrnes stopped class one day to talk with us about how important this visit was. I’ve kept in touch with Dr. Byrnes and I support the scholarship named in his honor. He really gave of himself to students.”

Smith’s science classes took place in Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Memorial Hall, Assumption’s former science building. Today, science classes, research and other laboratory activity are in the 63,000-square-foot Richard and Janet Testa Science Center. With its multi-purpose classrooms, well-appointed teaching and research labs and stunning three-story atrium, the Testa Science Center underscores the strength of Assumption’s science curriculum. Smith said she has not yet ventured into Testa, but has done “drive-bys” when she has been back home in Worcester and attended Mass on campus.

She credits her Assumption education for preparing her for the rigor of the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University. She was accepted at a time when women had begun to apply to veterinary medical schools in greater numbers. Tufts is still the only school of veterinary medicine in New England, so admission always has been highly competitive. “Our class was the first that included many women,” Smith said. “I liked Tufts’ ‘one medicine’ philosophy, which says basically that we’re doctors for all species. During our first year, we shared courses with medical students, then we followed various tracks after that.”

Passionate about her patients
After graduating from Tufts with a doctor of veterinary medicine degree in 1986, Smith went to work at a veterinary clinic in Connecticut. “In 1990, I started my own small animal practice, the Animal Hospital of Putnam,” Smith said. “We now have three full-time doctors and 30 employees. I’ve seen major advances in diagnostic technology and changes in the expectations of pet owners,” she said. “When I started out it was more of a shoot-from-the-hip approach to diagnosis. We did more symptomatic treatment back then. Today, we have new diagnostic capabilities. For example, we’re switching from old films (X-rays) to digital radiology. We have a big in-house lab at our hospital and call in specialists in ophthalmology, dermatology and other areas. It’s an exciting time to be in veterinary medicine.

“Dogs and cats have become the children of the family or the playmates for the kids,” Smith said. “People want their pets to have the same medical care they receive. I think we’ll see more specialties in veterinary medicine, which will mean there will be more emergency and MRI centers, and specialty practices available. People won’t have to travel as far for emergency and special procedures for their pets.”

Caring for animals does not end when Smith goes home at the end of her long days. She lives in Putnam where her hospital is located because she handles emergency care for her own patients. Also, her practice does its own animal rescue. Now she has almost all the pets she always wanted, except for horses. She does not have the time to own horses, but has access to riding them.

“My life is devoted to animals,” Smith said. “I go on veterinary-related trips around the world to see animals. I’ve been to China, India and Africa on trips with other vets. At home, I have Labrador retrievers. I see a lot of Labs in my practice because they put things in their mouths to carry around, then swallow them. On x-rays, I’ve identified keys, pacifiers, peach pits and even a light bulb, which fortunately passed through the dog unbroken.”

Smith has remained happy with the choices she made more than three decades ago to go to Assumption, head to graduate school at Tufts and become a doctor of veterinary medicine. “I love what I do,” she said. “I can’t imagine myself doing anything else.”