

# American Academy of Forensic Sciences

## Cheryl Nelson, DVM

### **Was forensic veterinary service a discipline when you joined the AAFS?**

It was not recognized as its own discipline, and the Academy was not initially sure what section to put me in, but I became a part of the General Section. Typically, the Veterinarians go into the Path/Bio section because they are also certified pathologists and perform necropsies; however, I am not a pathologist. For example, Melinda Merck is a Veterinarian and she is in the Path/Bio section. So, I found myself in the General Section and I am completely content to stay here!

### **How did you become involved in your discipline?**

I am a 1980 graduate of Colorado State University, and my career focused as a reproductive services specialist. After 14 years of attending veterinary related meetings, I saw something new with the AAFS meetings and in 1994, started going to AAFS meetings. The state license would not accept AAFS meetings as continuing education, so I had to fight to get it recognized. I also started going to other meetings, such as hazmat – something that Vets don't usually go to, in an effort to see what doors could open.

### **Was this something you always knew you wanted to do, or did something happen in your life that made you realize what your career path should be?**

From a young age I knew that I would be involved in veterinary services. The forensic side came later when I gained interest and saw the need. I knew I couldn't make a living on the forensics side, so I maintain my reproductive services practice. Also, Kentucky, where I live, was the last state to allow veterinarians to report animal abuse and the second to the last state to make animal abuse a crime; there are not many prosecutions unless it is a big case.

### **Was there a certification process within your discipline when you entered?**

Of course, there are state licenses for veterinarians to practice. We have continuing education that we have to do to maintain our license and the continuing education requirement was easier after I got the State to recognize AAFS training.

### **How has your discipline helped the AAFS?**

Just through general all around knowledge of each other's capabilities and disciplines is helpful for everyone.

### **How has the AAFS helped your discipline?**

Not really just the discipline itself, but AAFS also helps with networking and there is so much to learn from everyone involved in AAFS.

### **Are you involved in any education / training opportunities regarding your discipline within the AAFS?**

I have not been and have found it difficult to get an abstract accepted for forensics and continue to try to get training put together to garner interest in the field, however, I did present in 2017, and the article was published in Spain later that year.

### **Are there outside education / training opportunities you are involved in?**

I had to search for training that would be useful as a vet. Animal genetics would be something interesting to get into with human death cases, and toxicology in veterinary services is also important.

In 2008, the International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association was founded. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals funds most of it and the University of Florida provides training where there are multiple crime scenes, and entomology and plant information is provided.

We try to educate people on how insurance laws have changed in this country regarding large animals. In the 80s and early 90s, horses would outlive their usefulness and they would be electrocuted for the insurance. Wording in policies changed around 1999 to include a necropsy.

I also teach Police, Fire, Search and Rescue, and Forestry staff on trauma and injuries relating to animals, such as, tension pneumothorax and stop bleeding. I purchased an animatronic dog from Trauma FX to conduct this training. It is called a K9 Diesel Advanced Canine Medical Simulator. Fun side story: When it was developed it was strictly for the military and the company would not sell it to a civilian. Well, I didn't take no for an answer and I continued to call and write to them until they finally gave me a quote. I think they thought the quote would be outrageous and I wouldn't pay that much, but they were wrong! So, I was the first civilian to purchase the K9 Diesel.

### **Have you been a member of any committees within the AAFS?**

I have been on the Regional Representative Letter Writing committee for several years where we interview prospective General Section members and provide letters of recommendation. It was very interesting because you get to talk to all of the different fields and have fun learning about these people and how they got into forensics. This work helped with promotion to Member and I highly recommend getting involved in committees, going to the annual meetings and attending the various lunches. A word of advice, we should always be looking to come up with something new. I'm never afraid to ask questions - always ask questions and come up with something new, then work hard and provide consistent quality work every day.