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Pet World  
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## Celebrating 40 Years of Winning for Cats

By Steve Dale

Preparing for the Future, Celebrating Our Past:  
The Winn Feline Foundation at 40



A receipt of the organization is directed to the support of health-related studies benefiting cats.  
WWW.WINNFELINEHEALTH.ORG

Every cat owner on the planet should be sending a thank you note, or at least an anniversary card to the Winn Feline Foundation. The mission of the Winn Feline Foundation, which is celebrating their 40th year, is to fund cat health research.

To say cats have benefited from Winn's funding is an understatement. Some examples are pretty dramatic. In the 1980's cats were increasingly suffering serious health affects and many succumbing as a result of a kind of heart disease called dilated cardiomyopathy. In 1987, veterinary cardiologist Dr. Paul Pion of the University of California School of Veterinary Medicine, Davis approached Winn for funding to prove his theory that manufactured cat foods were missing an essential amino acid, called taurine. It turned out he was right; taurine was immediately added to all cat food diets. The result is that dilated cardiomyopathy is rarely seen today.

Examples of Winn's impact are numerous. Joan Miller, now vice president of the Cat Fanciers' Association was involved with Winn as a member of the Board of Directors since 1978 and serviced as the organization's president from 1980 through 1996. "There's little doubt in my mind that the seed money (from Winn) made a difference for feline leukemia research."

There are many additional examples of Winn providing funds for medical breakthroughs. In 2003 Dr. Deborah Greco, then at Colorado State University, Ft. Collins, discovered that for many diabetic cats, a diet of high protein and low carbohydrates may lessen or even eliminate insulin dependency. Another example that matters daily for cats is knowledge about the impact of high blood pressure. Today, high blood pressure is diagnosed in about 20 per cent of cats with chronic kidney disease using readily available equipment. Winn provided funding to help researchers understand the medical implications of high blood pressure in cats (including blindness and stroke-like events) as well as the technology to measure the blood pressure.

The Winn Feline Foundation was created as a result of an idea of a cat breeder named Robert Winn to fund cat health research – which no one was doing 40 years ago. To get the organization off to a rousing start, The Cat Fanciers' Association made an initial whopping contribution of \$125. "Can you believe it all began with \$125?" Miller says and laughs.

Since there was no one else was around who seemed to care about funding cat health studies, Winn easily attracted the top feline researchers. "I have worked with the Winn Foundation since its inception," says Dr. Neils Pederson, legendary cat health researcher, and director of the Center of Companion Animal Health, Director of the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory, University of California – Davis. "They (Winn) have provided me with a tremendous amount of support for my various FIP (feline infectious peritonitis) studies through the years. Although we have not found a way to prevent or cure this devastating disease, I believe that our research has contributed greatly to understanding this complex infection."

While lots has been learned, Peterson admits FIP remains a mystery with no known cure or treatment. Susan Gingrich lost her kitty, named Bria, to the devastating disease, which mostly kills kittens. In 2005, Gingrich initiated a fund devoted to finding answers. "Experiencing Bria's life and death from FIP changed our lives forever," says Gingrich. "Unfortunately, Bria's sad story is not unique. FIP is a problem worldwide. It affects not only domestic cats, but some wild species as well. Thanks to the generosity of my brother Newt Gingrich and the Center for Health Transformation Foundation, the (Bria) Fund was created."

Arguably, the most prevalent killer of middle aged indoor cats, and unquestionably the most common heart disease in cats today is called feline hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM). Sometimes cats with HCM live out normal lifespan, but usually they die at around middle-age – and there is no effective treatment. In 2002, I established a fund named for my, Ricky, who died of the disease. In 2004 Dr. Kathryn Meurs, Washington State University Richard L. Ott Chair of Small Animal Medicine and Research, discovered a gene responsible for HCM in Maine Coon cats; three years later Meurs found a different mutation responsible for HCM in Ragdolls. These discoveries make it possible for breeders to conduct a DNA test

using a simple cheek swab, and determine which cats shouldn't be bred. Research in other breeds, as well as mixed breed cats, is ongoing.

"With support, I'm optimistic about discovering more" Meurs says.

But it does all come down to support, meaning dollars. Research, of course, does cost money.

While there are more cats than dogs in America, the sad fact is that funding for cat health initiatives doesn't come close to matching their canine cousins.

"Dogs are given preferential dollars for research," says Dr. Anna Worth, president of the American Animal Hospital Association. "(As a result) Veterinarians have more tools to treat dogs than cats. For example, while there is pain medication for cats, it's been slow in developing and not nearly as many options as there are for dogs."

Dr. Susan Little, current president of Winn says that one of the Foundation's goals is to shrink that gap between dog health funding and funding for cat health initiatives. "There's no question we're playing catch up," says Little. "In recent years, with help from generous supporters we've accomplished a great deal. But we still have so much to do."

The Winn Feline Foundation website also offers pet owners reputable technical information concerning cat health issues. There's also a news blog. Learn more at [www.winnfelinehealth.org](http://www.winnfelinehealth.org).

Dr. Ron DeHaven, CEO of the American Veterinary Medical Association says, "The nearly 82 million pet cats, along with their owners and veterinarians, have benefited greatly from the knowledge gained by the exceptional research funded by Winn."

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