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Affinity for Animals: Reed looks to make a difference in veterinary world

By Freddie Bourne McLean County News
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Dr. Debbie Reed, director of the Breathitt Veterinary Center at Murray State University's Hutson School of Agriculture, stands alongside an information booth at the McLean County Poultry Expo and Trade Show at Myer Creek Park in Calhoun on Tuesday, Aug. 30.

Freddie Bourne | McLean County News

Before Dr. Debbie Reed became director of the Breathitt Veterinary Center at Murray State University's Hutson School of Agriculture, she was just starting out on her family's row crop farm between Island and Rumsey in McLean County under her maiden name Debbie Seymour.

"I was always interested in agriculture," Reed, 62, said. "I followed my dad around there on the farm and participated in the farm as much as possible as I grew up operating equipment, working in the hog house.

"I really approached veterinary medicine from the agricultural side because of my interest in farming and how that operated."

Reed eventually became an active member of the county's 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) programs to further her interests.

After graduating from McLean County High School in 1978, Reed headed off Western Kentucky University, completing both bachelor and master of science degrees in agriculture in five years.

She furthered her education at Auburn University in Alabama getting her doctor of veterinary medicine degree in 1987.

It was at Auburn where Reed focused her interests in food animal medicine, but said it wasn't easy at first to secure a job.

"At that point, there were much fewer women in the veterinary profession, and a lot of the veterinarians who were doing food animal work were concerned that the farmers would not be accepting of a woman showing up to do veterinarian work," she said.

Despite some reluctance from farmers, Reed didn't think about backing down and found an opportunity through the Jackson County Farm Bureau to run her own private practice, Gray Hawk Veterinary Services, starting in 1988 and remaining open for a total of 18 years.

"It wasn't really about proving anything or being a female in the field, it was simply the fact that this was the job I wanted," Reed said. "I didn't really see it was any big deal that I was a female doing this job."

She recalls the experience fondly, which allowed her to work in many different capacities.

"...I did all kinds of medicine. I particularly enjoyed surgeries of all types," she said. "I enjoyed working with the farmers and ... did all different kinds of medicine (for) both pets and food animals, just because that was necessary in that part of the state."

She said that the initial apprehensions that people had before subsided.

"Over time, the people in the community where I worked became accustomed to it and didn't really think much about it," Reed said.

By the time Reed got married and started raising a family, she said the work started to become overwhelming running the practice and being on call all of the time.

She moved onto the Breathitt Veterinary Center, first starting out as a case coordinator in February 2006 before becoming the interim director in 2014 and then director the following year.

She also pursued another masters degree at WKU, this time in public health.

Though she works with animals, Reed said the education ranges from knowing anatomy, pharmacology and physiology of several species, while public health also plays a role.

"It's estimated that 75% of the emerging diseases in the world are zoonotic — they'll affect animals and humans," she said. "Part of our education includes discussing the human part of the disease in addition to the animal portion of the disease."

Since starting out in the field, Reed feels that society has become more accepting with women in management in lots of job fields.

"My (sons) are now in their late 20s (and) they've never known anything else," she said. "Their mom went out and worked on cows and that was perfectly normal.

"I think we're moving in the right direction"

However, Reed feels more progress needs to be made regarding the profession at large.

“We’ve developed the idea that this person should be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and that is simply not sustainable,” she said. “We cannot ask people to work those kinds of hours and to be on call or be responsible. ...We can’t ask that of people. ...We have to have some downtime.”

But Reed still finds motivation knowing that she is helping make a difference when exploring and researching different diseases and to help provide information to those in need.

“Knowing that what we do here in the laboratory is so valuable to the veterinarians, to the farmers, to the pet owners — that’s what gets me back to work every day,” she said.