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Large-animal vet David Fry has tough job but wouldn't do anything else

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◀ 14

DANIEL CLIFTON • PICAYUNE EDITOR



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Dr. **David Fry** (standing) and veterinarian tech **Tami Luckenbach** of Hope Animal Clinic in Marble Falls offer mobile, large-animal services. Though the job entails long hours and often dirty work, Fry says he can't imagine doing anything else. Staff photo by Daniel Clifton

MARBLE FALLS — It was the girl clutching flowers that stopped veterinarian David Fry and made him consider his options. The outlook looked grim for the horse after it caught its front legs in a disc, the type farmers pull behind tractors to till up the soil. Those same blades that help usher in new life for row crops now looked as if they would mean death to the girl's horse.

The blades had chewed up the front legs beyond what Fry thought he could repair.

"I remember looking at the horse's legs, it was bad," he said. "I just didn't think there was any way to save the horse."

Fry considered his choices and the only one — the most humane one, considering the horse's pain and prognosis — was to put down the animal. It's not something Fry wanted to do as a equine enthusiast himself with four roping horses. But sometimes, the doing what's best is a tough decision to make.

It's something almost everyone involved that day understood. Even the girl, maybe, as she held those flowers, realized what was best for her horse.

This was going to be a tough day. But it was a day in the life of a large-animal veterinarian. A life Fry chose, or, partly that chose him.

As a youth, Fry grew up haunting the Highland Lakes ranches of his father and grandfather. His dad owned, and still owns, a ranch in Burnet, while his grandfather had a ranch just east of Marble Falls that then was called the Fry Fish Camp but now is part of the Cimarron Ranch. Part of his routine included watching the visiting veterinarian, who checked on the cattle, horses and other livestock.

"I just thought it was amazing, watching him palpate a cow, you know, checking to see if there was a calf in there," Fry said.

While the scene of a vet checking a cow for her calf might send other youth heading in a totally different career path, it only solidified Fry's decision. But deciding to become a vet and actually becoming one are two very different things.

To say getting into vet school is competitive is kind of like saying Phil Robertson of "Ducks Dynasty" has facial hair.

First, there are the four years of undergraduate study followed by four years of veterinary school, if you can even get in. Most states have only one colleges with a veterinarian school. In Texas, that's Texas A&M University. Some states such as New Mexico and Arkansas don't have a vet school.

"Sometimes, I think my application ended up in the wrong pile. They looked at it, said this fella doesn't have a chance and tossed it in (the unaccepted) pile, but, somehow, it slipped into the accepted pile," Fry said with laugh. "Of 700 people who apply, they take 100 at the most,"

Fry completed both his undergraduate and veterinarian studies at Texas A&M. At graduation in 1998, most of his classmates chose a different path: small animals. Of the 110 vet school graduates, only 15, including Fry, chose large-animal practice.

"It's a tough way to make a living," Fry said. "You definitely don't make much money at it. People think vets make a lot of money, but we really don't. But that's not why we do this."

After vet school, Fry headed out into the world of large-animal and equine practice. He soon found himself practicing medicine and as an owner in a large cow-calf operation in Navasota. But with his connections to the Highland Lakes, he always had his eye on returning to the area.

About a decade ago, he did when he started his own practice, a mobile equine clinic in the Marble Falls area.

He was rewarded with long hours, hard work and dangerous situations. It's not an 8-to-5 job. Fry's on call pretty much 24-7. Even the day he sat down to talk about his career at Hope Animal Clinic in Marble Falls, Fry had spent a big part of the night before at the center checking on a colicky horse — once at 10:30 p.m. and again at 4 a.m.

When a call comes in, Fry goes. Even now that he works with Hope Animal Clinic, Fry still maintains the mobile clinic portion of his practice.

As a large-animal specialist, Fry slogged through mud, wrestled calves and handled skittish horses.

Along the way, Fry has suffered his fair share of job-related injuries. Some of those injuries have led to the 11 surgeries he has undergone.

The long hours, not-so-great pay and possibility of injuries begs one question: Why do it?

“Because I love it,” Fry said.

As a primary care vet, Fry helps large-animal owners with the day-to-day care of horses and cattle. He sees himself as a partner with his clients in helping make sure their animals are healthy.

“I really get to become friends with my clients,” Fry said. “And I'm trusted by my clients.”

If there is a problem, his clients know that when they call Fry, he'll be on his way. With the mobile vet clinic, Fry and his technician, Tami Luckenbach, can handle a lot of issues in the field including X-rays and even some surgeries. For bigger problems, they can transport the animal to Hope Animal Clinic or Fry can refer the issue to a specialist. Though Fry has a breadth of experience and knowledge, there are some things better handled by a specialist.

“I have a close relationship with a couple specialists, so I can send (clients) to them if that's what needs to be done,” Fry said.

For almost nine years, Fry owned and operated Fry Mobile Equine Clinic but recently joined forces with Hope Animal Clinic just south of Marble Falls on U.S. 281. Autonomy and independence had their benefits, but Fry has found the fit right at Hope.

Hope Animal Clinic added some nice equipment but also gave Fry a chance to work with other veterinarians. While he's the primary large-animal vet, Fry said bouncing problems and ideas off the other veterinarians leads to better care for all the animals.

Along with being the only large-animal specialist at Hope Animal Clinic, Fry is among a small percentage of large-animal specialists across the country. Veterinarian medicine practice is challenging enough, but large-animal practices with the size of the cow, bull or horse bring new issues and complications. So fewer and fewer vet school students are choosing that route.

Even those who do often switch career paths. Of those 15 vet graduates in 1998 who chose to practice large-animal medicine, Fry said only five were still in it as of this year.

But Fry can't see himself doing anything else — even on tough days, such as the one about five years ago with the girl holding the flowers and her horse facing certain death.

Fry recalled it as if it had just happened.

“You could see bones and everything, just hanging there,” Fry said. “There was no way that horse was going to make it.”

But as he looked at the girl holding the flowers, Fry couldn't bring himself to put down the horse. Instead, he gathered his tools and equipment and went to work. He spent eight hours sewing up the horse's legs, though, in the back of his mind, he had his doubts. Maybe he was just prolonging the inevitable.

Five years later, that girl is still riding that horse, which made a full recovery. Even though Fry stitched the horse up, he doesn't take credit for its recovery, calling it divine intervention. Still, something inside him led him to the decision to try to save the animal.

“It was all because she was holding those flowers,” Fry said. “I couldn't put the horse down.”

And then, a day that looked as if it would be one of his worst as a equine vet, became one of his best.

For more information on equine or large-animal needs, call Fry or Hope Animal Clinic at (830) 693-3039.

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