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Florida Couple Leaves Entire Fortune to Assure Care of Four-Legged Friends

Tom and Dorothy Morris of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, were not even on the University of Georgia's mailing list during their lifetimes. Now, their names will be etched into the campus record books forever.

The Morris', who had no children, decided to leave their entire \$2 million estate to the [University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine](#).

But why? Neither Tom nor Dorothy, or any of their family, for that matter, attended UGA.

"When their lawyer contacted us, we knew very little about Mr. and Mrs. Morris, and didn't have any idea why they left a gift to our college, or how much it would be," said Keith Prasse, dean of the college. "He told us they chose UGA because they heard we are the best veterinary college in the country."

That's true, according to their lawyer, Peter Arnold of Ft. Lauderdale, who is also the Morris' nephew and executor of their estate.

"My uncle looked at veterinary colleges and decided the University of Georgia had the finest and that's why he left his money there," said Arnold. "But I didn't know how he made that decision."



The University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine received a \$2 million bequest from the Morris' estate.

The source of the Morris' regard for the UGA college turns out to be their veterinarian, Dr. William Meriwether, a 1954 graduate of the college. And it evidently was his casual recommendation that landed the college one of the largest private gifts in its history.

Thomas M. Morris Jr., who died in 1985, and his wife, Dorothy (Dotty) May Morris, who died in 2003, bequeathed their entire estate, valued at about \$2 million, to the veterinary college – a place they never visited and knew about only through Meriwether. They specified that the money be used for veterinary student scholarships.

The scholarship fund is expected to yield about \$90,000 annually, which the college will use to provide scholarships for a new program that allows students to study simultaneously for a DVM (doctor of veterinary medicine) degree and a Ph.D.

Tom and Dotty, originally from New Jersey, married in 1949 and settled in Ft. Lauderdale, where they operated several successful businesses. Tom bought and sold real estate and became a contractor. Dotty co-managed their properties and served as their accountant.

With no children of their own, the Morris' showered affection on animals, and especially cats, according to Arnold.

"They always had cats in their apartment," he said. "They would adopt strays off the street. My uncle was very generous and he took good care of the cats. He fed them chopped liver. The cats were their



Tom and Dorothy Morris on their wedding day.

children.”

He also made sure the cats received necessary medical attention from their veterinarian. Meriwether says he lost track of the number of Morris cats he treated over 20 years.

“Mr. Morris was a fine gentleman and an excellent client, and he took extremely good care of his cats,” Meriwether recalls. “They lived a long time. I don’t think I had to euthanize more than one.”

Several times Morris talked to Meriwether about doing something after his death to help animals. It was apparently those conversations that steered Morris toward UGA.

“He asked me where I went to veterinary school and I told him the University of Georgia,” said Meriwether, who practiced for more than 30 years before retiring in the 1990s.

“He asked if it was a good school and I told him it was excellent, one of the best in the country. He asked if there was anything he could do to help the college and I told him I was sure they would appreciate a bequest for scholarships.”

Meriwether said that though his opinion of the veterinary college was honest, he wasn’t trying to persuade Morris to give money to the college. “It was just an off-hand remark. But he had a lot of confidence in me, which I appreciated, and I’m glad I was able to help.”

Arnold said his uncle’s insistence on leaving the bequest to UGA was consistent with his success in business. “He was a smart businessman and took a hard-headed business approach to everything he did,” Arnold said. “He did some research and decided the University of Georgia was where his money should go.”

Prasse said that while a gift of this size isn’t common, it’s actually not unusual for veterinary colleges to receive gifts from people who have no connection to the college.

“It’s the way many big gifts come in,” he said. “The relationship between people and animals is profound. That relationship is often enhanced by veterinarians, and veterinary schools are often the benefactors. We understand that, and we’re certainly very grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Morris.”

Prasse said the dual degree program that will allow students to work toward DVM and Ph.D. degrees at the same time will be one of a few such programs in the country. The program is designed primarily to encourage students to prepare for careers in academic and private institutions that require advanced research training.

The program will take six to seven years to complete, and without scholarship support students will incur prohibitive debt, Prasse said. So the stipends provided by the Morris bequest will be valuable in easing their financial burden, he said.

LEAVE A LEGACY® wishes to thank the [University of Georgia](#) for sharing this story.