Pre-Vet Life @ Dordt College

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Mike Schouten, who runs Dordt’s Ag Stewardship Center, is a warm, quiet man. “As good with children as he is with animals,” one student tells me.

An agriculture student is standing a few pens away—Ian Edwards. He is watching over one of the ewes under his care. A moment later I hear a call. “She’s pushing!”

Edwards grabs a plastic glove and rushes into the pen. Seconds later, a baby lamb slips out in a pool of clear liquid. For a moment it lies still, and then it begins to cough repeatedly.

“She’s just clearing the fluid from her lungs,” Edwards explains, watching closely. “This is five lambs in three days,” he adds with a laugh. “I had to pull the last one. It was so big she was having trouble.”

By now, the lamb is testing out her spindly legs. Within just an hour she will
be standing confidently and nursing.
Stripping off his gloves, Edwards smiles. "This is why I love Dordt. I'm just a freshman, but within my first month here I was already working on the farm."

In another part of the barn, Dordt Agriculture Professor Dr. Duane Bajema, campus advisor for the pre-vet program, is showing his students how to assist with a lambing.

This ewe is having trouble pushing—the baby is big. Two students pull on gloves and begin to help. Within moments, the first lamb is born. But another one is still coming.

For students who spend much of their time reading indoors, the farm is quite literally a breath of fresh air. It's a balm for the soul to be outside, caring for the animals and the earth.

I lean over the pen, focusing my camera, intent on capturing the moment. I hear Bajema say, "Let's have Kate do the next one."

My finger freezes on the camera button. This was not part of the freelance-writer job description.

I climb over the fence, my boots sinking into the muddy straw. The ewe is lying in the corner, shuddering with contractions. Her neck stretches out, and her lips pull back, revealing her teeth. The lamb's head is out now, but the rest of it is stuck. Inside the fluid sack, the lamb is opening and closing its jaw.

But a glance at Bajema reveals he isn't joking. He takes the camera from me, hands me two plastic gloves, and points to the pen. "Hop on in!"

"Go on," Schouten tells me. "Try to get both hooves and the head."

Gingerly, I slide my cupped hands slightly
inside the ewe. I move them around, feeling for legs. Then I pull. But the lamb doesn’t budge.

"Come on ... push," I whisper to the ewe. I pull harder, but I’m fearful of choking it. The little neck is so frail.

"Here," says Schouten, stepping into the pen. He puts his hands above mine, and we pull together.

With one final heave, the lamb slips out quickly and lies on the straw. At Schouten’s instruction, I pull the sack away from its face, clearing its mouth so it can take its first breath. Then I lift it up, and place it in front of the ewe. She leans down and sniffs it, and then starts to lick the lamb clean. "This is the bonding process," Schouten says, smiling. "Now we just need to get it to nurse."

Schouten, who grew up on a farm in Hawarden, Iowa, started working for Dordt in 1984. His work varies from day to day, he tells me. This time of year, a lot of it involves caring for livestock and preparing for spring planting.

He also facilitates student projects. Right now, they’ve been vaccinating lambs, calving cows, lambing ewes, or pregnancy-testing cows under the supervision of a trained vet. More often than not, those vets are Dordt graduates.

Schouten says that he loves seeing students outside of a typical classroom setting. "It’s a joy to have students come to the farm," he says. "To watch them learn, watch them grow—from incoming freshman to graduating senior—not only academically, but as a person, ready to go out into the world and serve the kingdom."

It’s rare for a small Christian college to have a farm, and the hands-on training Dordt students get there helps them figure out whether they want to pursue farm work or animal care as a vocation. For students who spend much of their time reading indoors, the farm is quite literally a breath of fresh air. It’s a balm for the soul to be outside, caring for the animals and the earth.

DORDT’S PRE-VET PROGRAM

The pre-vet program at Dordt is largely self-directed. Pre-vet students can major in whatever they want, even music or business. Most, however, are animal science, chemistry, or biology majors.

Bajema, the program advisor, helps students determine which vet school they hope to attend.

“We’ve had students enter a lot of different colleges of veterinary medicine,” Bajema says. “Ohio State, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, WSU, UC Davis, K State, Michigan State, Colorado State. One student is going to vet school in Poland,” he adds with a laugh.

Each school has different course requirements, and Bajema’s job is to help students meet the requirements of the vet school they hope to attend—and to make sure they get their applications in on time.

“It’s similar to trying to get into med school,” he says. “There are often 1,200 applicants for 120 slots. But Dordt has a good acceptance record.”

One highlight of the program is the pre-vet club, which connects students to opportunities to learn about veterinary medicine. The club meets monthly, bringing in speakers that include vet school students, recruiters from state schools, and people doing veterinary work in the military.

Through the club, students also take trips to learn more about vet work. One year, they shadowed a vet at an equine hospital. Another time, they visited the Omaha Zoo, where they fed giraffes and observed surgery rooms for exotic animals.

The club also provides a space for students to share their experiences with one another, and it inspires them to persevere in their work.

But the best part of the club, say students and faculty alike, is its veterinary representative: Dr. Fred Sick. Sick, a long-time Sioux Center resident, recently retired after 23 years of veterinary practice. Having spent decades as a practitioner, Sick has been able to encourage and direct students in a unique way.

Sick is soft-spoken and humble, often looking down when he talks, but always in the thick of things. The students may keep their heads down when he talks, but Sick’s advice is worth listening to.

Holly (Vander Heide) De Vries (’00)

After graduating with a major in animal science, De Vries worked for a year as assistant herdsman at the Dordt farm. She helped manage 20 students, teaching them how to milk, feed, and do the day-to-day work of running a dairy farm.

The next year, she began vet school at Iowa State. “You spend your entire day, every class, every day, with the same 100 people. You become close. It’s hard work,” she says. She returned to Sioux Center every weekend to work at the clinic.

De Vries has been at Central Veterinary Clinic in Sioux Center for 12 years. She works with dairy cattle doing herd health, which involves pregnancy-checks and surgeries. Working part-time now, she spends the rest of her time with her two children at home.

A favorite memory from her time at Dordt was a prank that put the loader tractor and John Deere gator from the Dordt Farm on the roof of the Commons with a sign that read, “Nothing jumps like a Deere.”

“I didn’t do it,” she adds quickly.
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But the most remarkable thing about him is his wealth of memories of his students.

“Now David Dykshorn...,” Sick recalls with a smile, leaning back in his chair. “David used to follow me around his grandfather’s dairy on his tricycle. And now he’s in practice in Abbotsford, British Columbia. He’s having a baby in June.”

He tells similar stories about dozens of other students, remembering where they came from, what they did when they were here, where they are now. He shows pictures on his phone of their families, and where they are currently practicing. He remembers them each by name.

“Fred has had a camaraderie with the students that just continues on. He does a wonderful job of staying in contact with them.”

— Dr. Duane Bajema, speaking of Dr. Fred Sick

Renee Ewald is one of Sick’s students, a junior biology major with a pre-vet focus.

“Dr. Sick is a jolly fellow,” she says. “It takes a while before you realize how deep his wealth of knowledge is. When you first talk to him, he seems like a nice...”

AG ALUMNI PROFILES

Sara McReynolds (’04)

McReynolds grew up on a cattle farm in Northwest Kansas.

“I chose Dordt because they had a farm, which few liberal arts schools do.”

An Ag Policy class at Dordt sparked her interest in agriculture policy. After attending vet school at Kansas State, McReynolds began to work for the North Dakota state government. She is now Assistant State Veterinarian for North Dakota, living in Bismarck.

Her work varies daily but includes creating regulations for imported animals and testing animals for diseases such as TB, brucellosis, or even rat viruses. She also helps with emergency responses to events like the avian influenza outbreak in Iowa and North Dakota, helping stop the rapid spread of the disease.

McReynolds says the most rewarding part of her work is helping with animal care. “I really like interacting with farmers and ranchers,” she says. “I’m an advocate for agriculture, so I like to promote and protect the health of livestock in the state.”

“I really like interacting with farmers and ranchers,” she says. “I’m an advocate for agriculture, so I like to promote and protect the health of livestock in the state.”
grandfather. But then you realize—this man is incredibly intelligent and cares so deeply about students and their success.”

Students get to know him well enough to know his hobbies. “He has a massive fish tank in his basement—a salt water tank—with sea anemones and tropical fish,” Ewald says. “It’s like his baby—he tries to keep the correct chemistry in the water so it can thrive. He loves to garden and grow plants. He has a cabin on Maple Lake, and he’s always posting about the sunrise, the return of wood ducks, the ice thickness. It’s fun to see a vet as a whole person.”

Besides his work with students, Sick attends conferences, speaks on panels, and interviews candidates for the Iowa State veterinary school. He has also done extensive research with Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica, an animal health company in Sioux Center, where he has helped create pig vaccines and contributed to other advances in preventative medicine.

**A LATE-NIGHT CRISIS**

Senior ag major Brianna Evans was overseeing calves at the farm. During an Ag Safety class, she noticed that one of the calves seemed off. Further examination suggested the calf had a severe case of scours, a bacterial disease in the intestinal tract. Students had been taught to recognize the signs: runny, yellow-colored manure. It’s common in calves because their immune system is still weak.

At Schouten’s direction, she gave the calf two sulfa pills, a shot of antibiotics, and a bottle of electrolytes. That evening, Evans received a phone call from another student at the farm—Rachel Limmex. Limmex’s voice was tense. The calf wouldn’t drink. His mouth was clenched and shaking, and his nose was cold.

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**AG ALUMNI PROFILES**

**Matt Boogerd (‘03)**

Boogerd majored in business at Dordt, taking mostly finance and economics courses. After graduation, he began interviewing for a job. “All I saw, everywhere, was cubicles,” Matt says. “And I thought, ‘No. Not happening.’”

Instead, Boogerd moved to Wyoming and worked as a guide for a season, caring for over 70 horses. The experience made him realize his true passion: working with animals. He enrolled in vet school at Iowa State.

In 2011, Boogerd began doing bovine medicine for Central Veterinary Clinic in Sioux Center. One of his favorite parts of the job is taking Dordt pre-vet students on calls. “Some students have phenomenal questions. It’s encouraging that they’re thinking about things in both a kingdom way and a business way.”

Boogerd loves doing OB work: calving or lambing. “It’s the miracle of life,” he says. “It’s like a puzzle you can’t see—you’re trying to figure it out.”
AG ALUMNI PROFILES

Katie (Tazelaar)
Van Singel ('16)

When Van Singel was young, her family lived in Chicago and frequently took her to the Brookfield Zoo. Ever since she could talk, she told her parents that she wanted to be a zookeeper.

At Dordt, Van Singel spent a semester interning at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. Another summer she took courses in Washington State, whale watching and tadpole hunting in the Orcas Islands.

Today, Van Singel is a full-time elephant zookeeper at the Oklahoma City Zoo.

"Elephants are so, so smart," she says. "We have a male named Kandula—he was used in cognition studies to test problem-solving abilities in animals. It’s a blessing and a curse for us. We have to give him constant puzzles and challenges to keep him engaged."

Van Singel’s favorite part of her job is working with endangered species. "If you’d asked me as a kid, I would’ve thought it was an unattainable dream. And now I get to do it every day. I never work a day in my life, because I love my job so much."

Evans returned immediately. But before she could find Limmex and the calf, another student, Sarah Ryan, approached her in concern. There was a problem with the lambs as well: they were not suckling. Evans went into the pen and felt the ewe’s udder. It was mastitis. She called and asked the student in charge of the ewe pen to bring his teammates out right away.

Next she ran back to where Limmex was with the calf. They decided they had to get the calf warm right away. So Ryan brought a wheelbarrow, and together they wheeled it into the barn and put it under the heat lamps. The calf wasn’t moving. Limmex called Bajema, who called Dr. Holly De Vries (’00), a local veterinarian and a Dordt graduate. De Vries came right away.

Meanwhile, the students in charge of the ewe arrived. Evans talked them through the options for how to get milk into the lambs, knowing that if they didn’t drink, they wouldn’t make it through the night. Since the ewe with mastitis was not milking, they tried putting the lambs on a different ewe. It didn’t work.

The students went to the pens of every single ewe who had lambed earlier that day, to try to get some colostrum. They milked four different ewes to get enough milk for the lambs, who were now extremely weak.

By this time, the vet had arrived. It was 10 p.m. " Normally that late at night, there is no one there," De Vries says. "I showed up, and there were 20 kids there. I was impressed, but also intimidated—I had 20 people watching me IV this calf, which is hard to do if it’s dehydrated."

It was hard. The calf’s blood pressure was so low that it took time to find the vein. But finally, the IV was in. De Vries gave the calf two bags of the IV solution, and they waited.

By the time both bags were gone, the calf was trying to get up. Half an hour later, he was walking around.

Evans ran back to check on the lambs. They were stable. Both crises had been averted, thanks to the students’ hard work and quick thinking—and the help of Holly De Vries.

THE ETHICS OF ANIMAL CARE

There was another dimension to the story of the calf—a question of ethics.

When the students called her, De Vries spoke to Duane Bajema about the cost of an IV for the calf. Having her come out and place the IV would be more...
It was not just with Noah and his descendants. It was with all flesh—every living creature on earth. Not only are animals our fellow creatures, they are also our fellow covenanters with God.

Dordt Theology Professor Dr. David Henreckson teaches a core theology course at Dordt. In his class, students read a Wendell Berry essay on the doctrine of creation. Berry argues that if God calls something good, it has divine or sacred value.

“It’s our obligation as his stewards to recognize that value in creation,” says Henreckson. “What therefore do we owe to it? What are some of our characteristic actions or vices that cause us to destroy or harm what God said is good?”

“At what point do you decide it’s time to let it die—to let nature take its course?” Bajema asks. “The IV ended up costing $120. What if it had been $5,000? What if it had been a beloved pet rather than a bull calf?”

“In the end, we decided to save it. It was a good learning experience for the students to have a vet come out,” says De Vries. “But a producer looking at numbers might not have done it. That’s the reality of production medicine.”

Ethical dilemmas like this arise frequently in veterinary work. And responding to them requires a framework for how to think about animal care.

At Dordt, professors teach students to think through the implications of their theology. In particular, they consider two fundamental questions: What is an animal? And, What is an animal for? How veterinarians or farmers answer these questions will shape how they do their work.

When God first created animals, he called them “very good.” And in Genesis 9:8–10, when God established his covenant after the Flood, it was not just with Noah and his descendants. It was with all flesh—every living creature on earth. Not only are animals our fellow creatures, they are also our fellow covenanters with God.

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“As Christians, I hope we are inclined to see human life as having intrinsic value and dignity—we don’t just put a price tag on human life when making moral decisions about how to care for fellow human beings. It may be less instinctive for us to think about animal life in that way. But historically speaking, Christian theologians resisted the instrumentalization of animal life. They had an actual theology of creation, a theology we should be working to renew.”

Myron Kamper ('05)

Kamper grew up on a dairy farm in California’s Central Valley. Interactions with local veterinarians encouraged him to look into the profession.

Kamper appreciates the opportunities he had as a Dordt student: pre-veterinary club, attending a symposium at Iowa State, field trips to businesses and farms, and his advisors, former director of Career Services Ron Rynders and Dr. Fred Sick.

“Dordt gave me a solid education and the discernment for both veterinary school and my future job,” he says.

Today, Kamper lives in Visalia, California, with his wife and four children. He is currently a partner with Valley Veterinarians, Inc., specializing in health management for dairy herds. His mornings begin early, often at 4:30 a.m., when he begins his farm visits to do reproductive exams, give vaccinations, analyze records, and care for sick animals.

“The days can be long, but I really enjoy the interactions with clients and coworkers,” he says. “I love troubleshooting problems on the farm and figuring out how to improve efficiency and animal health.”
“It goes back to a fundamental understanding—the animals aren’t mine, they belong to the Lord,” Bajema says. “They are not mechanical widgets. They are God’s creatures.”

Matthew Scully, in his book *Dominion*, writes, “When you look at a rabbit and can see only a pest, or vermin, or a meal, or a commodity, or a laboratory subject, you aren’t seeing the rabbit anymore.... And yet, we are told, each one is counted and known by Him.... Whatever abstraction of science or theology we apply to animals, we know they are not like us, and yet we know they are not just objects either.”

The second question is perhaps more difficult: *What is an animal for?* Or, *What does it mean to have dominion?*

In Genesis 2:15, two different words are used to describe man’s dominion. He is told to “work” and “care for” the garden of Eden—in Hebrew, to shamar and abad. The meaning of these words is to “serve” and “protect.”

“In this passage, God is calling us to care for and serve the creatures entrusted to us,” says Biology Professor Dr. Jeff Ploegstra. “Not necessarily make them serve us.”

“I think it’s important to think about dominion by way of contrast,” Henreckson says. “A good sort of dominion versus a bad sort. This latter sort might be called domination. The fact that we have dominion does not mean that we have boundless authority, or that there are no restraints—no moral obligations that exist between us and animal life. We have the opportunity to oversee it for a particular purpose: to take good care of the thing that God just called very good.”

So, how do we care for animals in a way that is not dominating—a way that is consistent with how they are created to be? One way, Ploegstra suggests, is to try to understand how they interact in their natural ecosystems.

“Is this cow, in its ‘cowness,’ able to be everything a cow was created to be?”

— Senior pre-vet student Renee Ewald

Bison, for instance, disturb the ground and open up opportunities for new plants to grow. They are landscape shapers, disseminators of plant seeds, nutrient cyclers. They have relationships with the birds that swarm around them, eating the insects they stir up as they walk through the fields.

“Is an animal free to exhibit its native impulses?” Ploegstra asks. “Is it allowed to shape a place? Is it allowed to transform the landscape and carry out as many of those functions as it can?”

“We think about the creation praising God. What does that look like? Does seeing a young pig running across the field bring God joy? Does seeing a herd of animals protecting the young of other animals bring God joy? We like to simplify things, to make them amenable to our use. But at the same time I think that’s often counterproductive to our joy in experiencing the world.”

“Is this animal—in the way it is being raised, the way it is being treated—able to glorify God?” asks Ewald. “Is this cow, in its ‘cowness,’ able to be everything a cow was created to be? Is it able to proclaim the glory of God in its ability to be itself?”

As Ewald reflects on her time in Dordt’s pre-vet program, she considered her plans for the future. She hopes someday to bring the knowledge gained in her time at Dordt to her hometown of Terrace, British Columbia. There are horse trainers there, scattered hobby farms, and small dairies—all of them have expressed a need for a large animal vet.

“Dordt encourages you to think about how to respond to new topics as Christians,” Ewald says, “how to apply your faith to every area of life. One of the blessings of vet medicine is that you create deep relationships with your clients. You see them on a weekly basis. As a vet, you have the responsibility to speak into people’s lives and understand your role in animal ethics. In doing so, you do your part in showing others how the creation glorifies its God.”

KATE HENRECKSON