

# UPPER ARLINGTON VETERINARY HOSPITAL



## All the Way Up

Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital Wins 2023  
AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year



by Jen Reeder

SOMETIMES MARYLEE DUVALL WISHES HER DOCTORS provided her with the kind of outstanding care that her dogs receive at AAHA-accredited Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

She and her husband, Chuck, have been loyal clients since early 2009, less than a year after the practice opened. They brought in their two Havanese puppies, Hannah and Haley, and were immediately impressed with the friendly, professional team.

Since then, Duvall has watched the practice grow from a “tiny” facility run by spouses Joanna Parson, DVM, and Adam Parson, DVM, into a team of eight veterinarians and 39 support staff working in a specially designed, state-of-the-art facility.

Many of the staff who welcomed Hannah and Haley are still at the practice. They currently care for Haley’s kidney disease—and helped the dog and family cope with grief after Hannah’s death—and delight in the family’s new dog, Gracie.

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—JOANNA PARSON, DVM

Duvall’s dogs are treated like “rock stars.”

“They make you feel like you are special, and your dogs are special,” Duvall said. “I think it stems from Dr. Joanna and Dr. Adam. They’re warm and caring... I can’t imagine a practice being any better.”

She doesn’t need to: Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital is the 2023 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year.

This achievement is the culmination of a partnership that originated back in 1999, when two veterinary students at The Ohio State University met during a freshman mixer at a chicken wing joint.

“Opposites came together, I guess,” Joanna Parson recalled. “We started to talk, and it grew from there. My goal was to graduate and go back to my family (in New York), and he was going to go back to his hometown (of Mount Vernon, Ohio) to practice for his boss. Then all that culminated in a complete switch around, and here we are.”

### A Shared Love

“Here we are” is happily married with three children and an award-winning practice built on AAHA standards. After graduation, Joanna Parson was working as an ER veterinarian at MedVet Columbus when that practice underwent AAHA accreditation, and she witnessed what goes into becoming a top-notch practice.

So when she and her husband opened their own practices—starting with Northstar Animal Care in 2006 and Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital in 2008—they aspired to excellence.

“Initially all that drive that we had picked up from our previous mentors drove us and gave us that visceral grit to do it,” she said. “Once we started our own practices, it became, ‘How do we intentionally, formally do this?’ So AAHA became our platform to get all our systems in place, evaluate what we were doing and how we were doing things, and have our team evaluated and elevated based on those standards.”

In 2019, the couple merged their practices and constructed a new animal hospital with features that include six exam rooms with natural light thanks to floor-to-ceiling windows; automatic front doors; an elevator; exam tables that fold down to accommodate giant breeds; and a quiet break room for staff.

Adam Parson said they basically gutted an old commercial building to create today’s Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital.

“It was great to really make it our own and turn it into a dream come true for us,” he said.



Upper Arlington CSRs pose for a social media post in honor of CSR Appreciation Week 2023.

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“It’s a beautiful place to work. I’m very blessed to work here.”

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—HEATHER GIATIS, DVM

He feels lucky to be in his wife’s presence every day—“She’s definitely my pillar and my rock. She’s strong and works really, really hard”—and is immensely proud of their team.

“I’m proud of the consistent standards we uphold day in and day out, and the communication that we have with each other as a group,” he said.

Every staff meeting ends with a “staff shout out” to recognize someone on the team who went above and beyond with a client, pet, or another staff member. A veterinarian might shout out an assistant or a technician might shout out a CSR, which boosts camaraderie.

“I’m so thankful every day that I work with special people and such talented people who are just nothing but goodness,” Joanna Parson said. “They work their hearts out and they care for each other so much.”

It’s a level of appreciation that’s reciprocated by the team. Medical Director Heather Giatis, DVM, believes the

Parsons are probably “the kindest, most giving, caring people you could ever want” as bosses.

“They are compassionate. They care about their employees as individuals, and they make a lot of accommodations for us as working parents or if you’re helping to care for a family member,” she said. “They’re very accommodating with our schedules and trying to master that work-life balance that we all desire.”

At work, she appreciates that team members can pursue areas of veterinary medicine they find interesting. For instance, Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital can pursue abdominal ultrasounds to home in on diagnoses and treatment plans and offers minimally invasive laparoscopic surgeries for spays, liver biopsies, and pursuing gastric foreign bodies instead of having to do an open explore, Giatis noted.

“Those have been some really exciting advancements that we’ve been able to add in the past few years,” she said. “Creating those niches of medicine where we can focus on what we love and what we thrive on.”

It extends to the nursing staff, like a technician who thrives on palliative care and guiding clients through end-of-life decisions or employees who enjoy working on international health certificates.

The practice brings in specialists from The Ohio State University and MedVet to share specialty-level CE topics, posts online CE opportunities on the refrigerator in the break room, and invites speakers like drug reps to staff meetings—where the latest AAHA and AAFP guidelines are also discussed.

In fact, “intellectual curiosity” is a core value at Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital, in addition to respect, integrity, and urgency. So each year, the practice closes on a Saturday and pays for all interested team members to attend the Midwest Veterinary Conference.



Brian Gorby, DVM, (left) poses with Jenna Bonfiglio, DVM, after her first foreign body removal with the practice’s new endoscopic unit.

“The cool thing is that during our following staff meeting, we have a round-table discussion where we go around individually and highlight a few things that we learned,” Giatis said. “Last year, behavior was a really exciting topic for the staff, and we were able to implement change based off of that continuing education.”

Ultimately, “It’s a beautiful place to work. I’m very blessed to work here,” she said.

Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital is such a beautiful place to work that it doesn’t face the staffing issues currently plaguing the industry, according to Practice Manager Mandi Cooper, SHRM-CP, who has worked at the practice for 16 years.

“I am just really proud to say—and I knock on wood as I say this—that we are not short-staffed,” she said. “I think that does speak volumes to the culture.”

Team-building exercises also contribute to the culture. Activities range from goat yoga and eighties-themed pickleball outings to a staff volleyball team and an annual campout that welcomes the team’s children, significant others, and dogs.

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## “‘Intellectual curiosity’ is a core value at Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital.”

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“We get to see people outside of work, and then you get to know their spouses and their kids,” she said. “Because we do have such longevity on our staff, we’ve seen most of these kids go from second grade to college... We have literally all grown up together.”

The connectedness of the team paid off during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. When Franklin County reached the highest level of transmission, the practice leadership decided to briefly close to protect the staff and quickly develop curbside protocols.



Group photo from a goat yoga team-building activity.

“It was clunky maybe for about 45 minutes, but then after that it was like, ‘Oh, this is how we’ve been running all along,’” Cooper recalled. “To watch your team just do a complete 360 to operate a business differently was just really amazing to watch.”

### Supporting Staff and Community

Because the culture values family and wellness, Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital funds an employee assistance program (EAP) hotline to help the staff—or anyone in their household, including children as old as 25, even if they’re away at college—speak to licensed therapist about anything on their minds. (As Adam Parson noted, “wellness” isn’t just a buzzword for AAHA or for his practice.)

“They’re always welcome to come to me, but having a licensed professional at your fingertips 24 hours a day, 365 days a year is really beneficial for them,” Cooper said. “It’s completely anonymous.”

That care for people extends not just to the staff and clients, but the community at large.

“I always tell my kids, ‘Try to help somebody today. Do something nice for somebody today,’” Adam Parson said.

To that end, the Parsons volunteer at vaccine clinics for the nonprofit Columbus Dog Connection, and the practice hosts fundraisers to support the rescue organization. Staff members get a paid day off to volunteer at the charity of their choice. When the practice upgraded its computer system a few years ago, the team donated equipment still in working order to low-income families and seniors in need.



Employees feel comfortable suggesting causes to support, according to Giatis. After her sister, Jessica Pettiti, saved the life of a stranger by giving him CPR when he suffered cardiac arrest in a Costco, Giatis asked the Parsons if the team could receive CPR training from the American Red Cross.

"It was like, 'Yes, absolutely.' No questions asked," she recalled. "Not only are we employed here, but we go out into the world every day, and if our training can help us in our greater community, we want to be able to do that."

The Parsons sponsored CPR/AED and basic first aid training for employees this past spring and ordered an AED device in case an emergency happens onsite.

The team has also supported lifesaving efforts by hosting a blood drive inspired by a local child named Brady, who needed multiple blood transfusions during cancer treatments. When an infant named Noah with a rare genetic disorder needed a bone marrow transplant, a dozen employees underwent training to host a Be the Match event, which garnered 39 potential donors.

"Baby Noah did find a bone marrow match," Giatis said. "He was here in our building last year, and it brought so many of us to tears seeing him thriving and doing well."

Giatis said the team gets to know clients fairly intimately, so when they learn about a client's passion project, often "those become our passion projects, too."

That proved true for Teri Morin, who's been a client at Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital since 2014. She and her family had just moved to Ohio from Kentucky, where her cat, Sushi, had recently had surgery for kidney stones.

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When Sushi needed her stitches removed, positive online reviews led Morin to Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital. Even though Sushi hadn't been seen there before, the team welcomed her in and removed the stitches—and didn't charge the new resident a cent.

"They said, 'You don't owe us anything for that,'" Morin recalled. "I was like, 'I have found a new vet.'"

Over the years the team has cared for Morin's numerous cats and dogs—plus her children's hamster—while she became heavily involved volunteering with a local cat rescue's trap-neuter-release (TNR) efforts. The busy team at Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital takes time to offer free spay/neuter surgeries, vaccinations, and other care to feral cats Morin humanely traps—over 50 so far.

"Last summer I took in six cats a week from a big colony," she said. "[Upper Arlington] gives me a safe haven for the cats...They always follow up with a call the next day to make sure everything's okay. My feral cats are treated no differently than the paying clients."

She's worked with each of the veterinarians—all eight are graduates of The Ohio State University, incidentally—and is deeply impressed with not only the level of care they provide, but their genuine compassion.

"We have such a nice relationship," she said. "The whole staff is just wonderful."

Visit Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital online at [uavethospital.com](http://uavethospital.com). ✨



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.