



Numero Uno

Saint Francis Veterinary Center Named 2019 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year



by Jen Reeder

INDUSTRIALIST J. PAUL GETTY ONCE SAID, “The employer generally gets the employees he deserves.” That seems to be the case with Mark Magazu, DVM, founder of AAHA-accredited Saint Francis Veterinary Center in Woolwich Township, New Jersey.

As the 2019 Connexity by AAHA conference commenced in Indianapolis in September, he had no idea that his employees had secretly applied for AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year. The hospital came in second twice in the past, for general practice in 2012 and referral practice

in 2014. Magazu felt it might be self-aggrandizing to apply a third time.

But his staff wanted to honor the 65-year-old veterinarian’s legacy and asked for permission to pursue the award from the hospital’s leadership, including his son, Mark Magazu II, MPA, JD, president and CEO. Naturally, his son said yes, touched that they wanted to do something so special for his father.

“Dad believes in a simple truth: if you can help the people and communities around you to rise up, they will raise you up in return,” Magazu II said. “It is a perpetual

investment of compassion and purpose in those around us, which pays off in truly remarkable ways.”

Indeed, that simple truth led to something remarkable: Saint Francis Veterinary Center was named the 2019 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year.

At time of writing, the practice was a finalist but not the declared winner. Magazu II said that if Saint Francis Veterinary Center won, his father’s first reaction would probably be “a feeling of intense pride in his team.”

“He would undoubtedly believe the honor is theirs, not his,” he said. “It would be almost poetic if he were to receive this honor at this very moment, as his career winds down after more than 30 years leading our team.”

“Mr. AAHA”

Magazu II referred to his father as “Mr. AAHA” because his father is so passionate about the importance of AAHA accreditation and achieving AAHA standards each day at the practice.

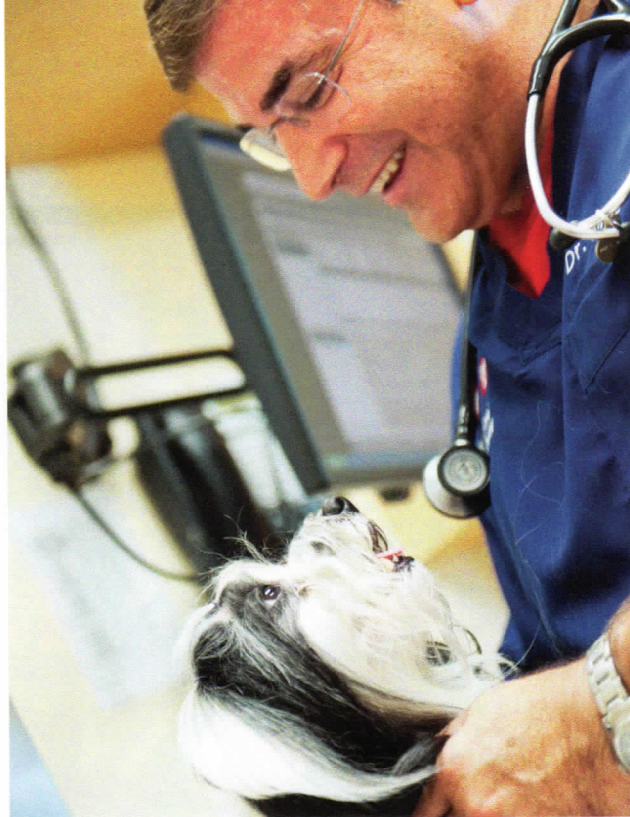
“AAHA accreditation is who we are—we are the AAHA standards,” he said. “As Dad always says, ‘These standards keep our profession among the most respected in the world.’”

The 2019 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year had humble beginnings. The senior Magazu, who earned his veterinary degree in Italy after studying at the United States Military Academy at West Point, opened Swedesboro Animal Hospital in 1986 with the help of his wife and their four children, Mark, Matthew, Michelle, and Melissa.

“We took over a run-down TV repair shop in a town of 400 homes and turned it into the first veterinary clinic in the community,” Magazu recalled.

The town continued to grow, and in 1992, Magazu built a new hospital next door to their home to meet the community’s needs. That year, the practice achieved AAHA accreditation.

“He felt that AAHA accreditation would set the foundations of excellence and integrity upon which that growth would occur,” Magazu II said. “And there can



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—MARK MAGAZU II, ON AAHA'S STANDARDS

be no doubt that AAHA accreditation over 25 years has guided our practice and our growth in every way over the years since.”

The hospital expanded to add the Tri-State Animal Emergency Center, and around 2013, in the midst of yet another expansion, the family consolidated both practices under the name Saint Francis Veterinary Center. Magazu said Saint Francis of Assisi is very special to the family as both the patron saint of Italy and of animals; Magazu and both of his sons share the middle name “Francis.”

Magazu said the mission of the practice is embodied by a quote from Saint Francis of Assisi: “Start by doing what’s necessary, then do what’s possible, and suddenly, you’re doing the impossible.”

Today, Saint Francis Veterinary Center occupies 10,000 square feet and boasts 13 veterinarians and a team of 75 total employees who serve more than 25,000 patients each year. It was New Jersey’s first certified level II 24-hour emergency practice, is an American Association

of Feline Practitioners—certified Cat Friendly Practice, and received a Certificate of Special Senate Recognition in 2013 from United States Senator Bob Menendez for “innovative veterinary care and outstanding contributions to the community.”

“But at our core, we simply strive to live up to Dad’s example and do the best we can for every person and patient who comes through our door,” Magazu II said. “The greatest fortune of my life has been to have my dad and mom as our bosses. Above all else, I learned from them that kindness and understanding can, in fact, be successful elements of a thriving business. You don’t need to sacrifice one for the other, and that is very fulfilling.”

Melissa Magazu, professional development manager at the practice, also feels grateful to have worked in the family business, starting with collecting and folding newspapers for kennels when she was nine years old. She said she grew up idolizing everything her dad stood for.

“He taught me the definition of honest, hard work,” she said. “Dad worked hard every day under three core values: pride, honor, and dignity. . . . I admire the man he is and all he believes in.”

Israel Thompson, director of strategic initiatives, said he’s proud to work with Magazu and some of his children, as well as the entire team, which he said is a great strength of the practice.

“They all love what they do and work as hard as they can to live [up] to the vision and mission of the hospital, Magazu, and Saint Francis,” he said.

Thompson leads the practice’s social media outreach, which includes nearly 20,000 Facebook followers. He encourages the team to capture and share meaningful moments with patients and clients on Instagram and plans Facebook posts for specials and holidays. He said part of the social media strategy is to help clients understand what goes on behind the scenes when their pet is out of the room for testing or other procedures.

“Social medial helps in this as well as showcases our teams and the different things we see to help educate our clients,” he explained. “We also use it as a tool for feedback from clients and the community.”

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—SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Community Spirit

Giving back to the community is a huge part of the culture at Saint Francis Veterinary Center. Through the K9 Heroes Total Health Program, about 75 handlers of police and service dogs receive steep discounts.

The program helped a police dog in training named Kimber who needed knee surgery before she even graduated; without it, the police department would have lost their recruit. But Saint Francis provided knee surgery and stem cell therapies that healed her knee. Now Kimber is a narcotics-detection dog in Atlantic City.

The practice also nurtures young talent and cowrote and coteaches the animal science program at the local high school. As part of the program, students spend 10 practicum hours at the animal hospital. Each year, four students also receive a \$1,000 scholarship to work at the practice.

“There are some [who] have stayed on to work with us because we also pay 100% of college tuition for anybody on our staff who wants to get their associate’s degree and become a certified veterinary technician,” Magazu II, shared. “That’s the kind of thing that benefits everybody.”

Veterinary assistant Julia Morris has worked at Saint Francis Veterinary Center for more than a year and said it’s an excellent place to work. She plans to go to veterinary school in the future and is grateful for the opportunities the practice offers.

“I am able to learn and see new things every day, and I am so thankful that someone of my young age is given the chance to do what I do,” she said. “The practice is really strong in its versatility and diversity of focuses and abilities. We have the emergency critical care unit, general practice, boarding, surgery, rehabilitation, ophthalmology, and more. It is also impressive how each section of the hospital communicates effectively and works together to make everything cohesive at all times.”



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—JULIA MORRIS, VETERINARY ASSISTANT

Sydney Melis, referral coordinator, said she's proud to be part of a staff that “will go above and beyond to take care of pets.” It's a sentiment echoed by Vlora Karpuzi, a veterinary assistant.

“I am proud of the quality of care we provide to our patients. We always put our patients and clients first,” Karpuzi said. “At Saint Francis, we pay attention to every little detail to ensure safety and quality of treatment for everyone involved.”

Karpuzi said Saint Francis Veterinary Center offers dog training classes and daycare to patients, which shows that the practice recognizes the importance of the behavioral and mental wellbeing of pets, not just physical health. She also admires the strong communication between members of the team and clients so they can give the best possible care when they take their pets home.

“Our communication skills allow the client to bring Saint Francis home with them,” she said.

Prioritizing the client experience and practicing top-notch medicine helped build a loyal clientele. Loraine Young said she's taken her dogs and cats to the practice for more than 30 years because the team, led by Magazu, treats her pets the way a doctor in human medicine would care for a child.

“Whatever they say, I trust their judgment,” she said. “They're very knowledgeable and take very good care of the animals.”

In addition to the practice's high level of medical care and the team's genuine compassion for animals, Young likes that the waiting room is designed to provide a bit of privacy for pets while they wait for appointments and that animals seem comfortable while recovering from surgery.

“I think they've thought of everything,” she said.

Recently, Young's six-year-old dachshund, Andy, suddenly couldn't use his back legs. The lovable dog was essentially paralyzed from intervertebral disk disease. But Magazu thought they could help him with spinal cord surgery, which would cost thousands of dollars.

Fortunately, Saint Francis Veterinary Center offers the Be My Angel Veterinary Fund, which provides free services for pet owners in need. Under the program, Saint Francis sent CAT scans of Andy's spine to the Health Design Lab at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia to develop a 3D rendering with multiple cross sections, so the surgeon was able to plan the surgery with pinpoint precision beforehand.

“To me, it was a miracle that Andy would have a chance at normal health again,” Young said. “At six years old, I really did not want to give up. Now he's wagging his tail and beginning to get motor function back into his hind legs, which is amazing.”

She's incredibly grateful to Magazu and Saint Francis Veterinary Center for helping Andy and all the pets she's had over the years and recommends the practice to other animal lovers because it's so outstanding.

“They've set the bar high for themselves, and they meet those standards.”

For more information, visit saintfrancis.org. ✨



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is an award-winning member of the Dog Writers Association of America and the Cat Writers' Association.