

Military service dog inspires Vietnam War vet to become a veterinarian

By Kandace Lankford
NJM Correspondent

NORTH JACKSONVILLE — In the jungles of Vietnam, Ralph Sevelius witnessed something that would change his career path from crunching numbers to caring for furry creatures.

While serving in the 199th Light Infantry Brigade of the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, he saw a military service dog get injured after being caught in a booby trap. Soon afterward, the helpless animal was evacuated by helicopter to receive medical attention.

The whole incident lasted only a few minutes, but the memory became permanently etched Dr. Sevelius' mind.

When Dr. Sevelius was wounded in combat some time later, he spent nine months in the hospital. During that time, he thought long and hard about what he wanted to do with the rest of his life, and his thoughts kept returning to the service dog, who faithfully served to save the lives of others.

His experience with the service dog led him to pursue a career in veterinary medicine.

"While I was recovering, I had a lot of time to think about what I should do," said Dr. Sevelius. "I kept remembering the dog, and how he risked his life for mine. I always



Cornerstone Animal Hospital is located at 10569 Lem Turner Road and Northside Animal Hospital is located at 11475 N. Main St.



wondered what happened to him after he was airlifted out."

After his recovery, Dr. Sevelius attended the University of Florida for two years of pre-med requirements and then was accepted into the Auburn University Veterinary Program, from which he graduated in 1975.

Upon graduation, he worked at an animal hospital in Jacksonville Beach, then in 1979, he opened Northside Animal Hospital on North Main Street. In 1991, he opened a second veterinary practice on Lem Turner Road, Cornerstone Animal Hospital.

Four years ago, Dr. William Branch, a graduate of Kansas State University, joined Dr. Sevelius and began practicing veterinary medicine at Northside and Cornerstone Animal Hospitals. He has a special interest in medicine and surgery.

Both locations offer a wide scope of care and services, including the simplest things, from immunizations and lab work to the most complicated, such as orthopedic surgery. Although the primary goal is to provide the utmost of care for animals, developing relationships with the animals and their owners is a huge part of the overall care program.

"We have employees that have been with us for fifteen years or more — when clients come in, they always see the same faces," said Dr. Sevelius. "We have a different level of dedication to our clients — they become our family, and we provide individual care and attention."

Sonya Speights has been bringing her 13-year-old American bulldog mix, Chyna, to Cornerstone Animal Hospital since he was just a few weeks old.



Glades Hutsell, a veterinary technician, greets American bulldog mix, Chyna, and her owner, Sonya Speights.

"They have the best doctors and the best care," she said. "My dog is getting older and is starting to have some health issues. They take the time to explain the medical problems and all of the treatment options, and they do it with care — they empathize with you. Everybody here loves your pet."

As Dr. Sevelius spoke about how difficult it is for pet owners, as well as for him and the staff, when a sick pet has to be put to sleep, his miniature Yorkie, Sushi, rested in his arms.

Dr. Sevelius was eating at a restaurant one day when he looked out the window and saw the then disheveled dog wandering around in the street. He went outside to usher the dog to safety, and noticed that she had no collar, so he took her in and tried to find her owner.

No one came forth to claim to the dog, so Dr. Sevelius adopted her, and she has become his constant companion, often accompanying him to work.

Dr. Sevelius' care for animals extends beyond the pets he takes care of and local stray animals, he also goes on medical missions trips to Honduras, where he vaccinates and takes care of dogs, chickens, horses and other animals.

Both Cornerstone Animal Hospital and Northside Animal Hospital are a home away from home for pets — both locations offer boarding and day care, where pets are fed, exercised, nurtured, and showered with attention.

Cynthia Shortridge, who has a six-and-a-half-year-old French bulldog named Ms. Ellie Mae, brings her dog to day care at Northside Animal one day a month while she and her husband run errands.

"When we get there and go to get out of the car, she literally pulls me to the door," said Mrs. Shortridge. "When she gets inside



Dr. Ralph Sevelius has been caring for furry friends in North Jacksonville since 1979. His constant companion, Sushi, often comes to work with him.

and sees everyone, she's all over them, and they bend down and pet her and love on her too."

Mrs. Shortridge's children and grandchildren all live out of state, so Ms. Ellie Mae is like her child now, she said. And she fully trusts Northside Animal Hospital to take care of Ms. Ellie Mae.

"They go beyond excellence — they care about the animal and about your feelings too," she said. "If she ever has to be on an antibiotic, or if I have to take her in or even call them with any concerns, they always follow up with a phone call the next day to see how she is doing."

Both Cornerstone and Northside Animal Hospitals offer military, multi-pet, and senior citizen discounts.

Your pet's health is important to them, so they'll keep you fully informed of the pet's vaccination schedule.

"If your dog gets one of the diseases it's been vaccinated against, such as parvovirus or heart worms, we'll treat the condition for free, as long as you've followed the treatment schedule," said Dr. Sevelius.

For more information about how Cornerstone and Northside Animal Hospitals can help you care for your pet, visit their website at www.vetcarejax.com, or call their office at (904) 757-4610 (Northside) or (904) 766-3089.

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