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LOCAL NEWS

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Veterinary clinic hits golden anniversary

While The Oaks in Smithfield has grown, business stays in family

By REEMA AMIN
ramin@dailypress.com

When Dr. Ryland Edwards started at Virginia Tech in 1954, his plan was to get a dairy science degree and come home to work on his father's farm in Smithfield.

He changed his mind after hearing a couple of lectures on veterinary medicine. He wanted to treat animals, not just work with them.

Edwards, now 79, recently marked the 50th anniversary of when he opened The Oaks Veterinary Clinic, named after his father's farm.

Over the last half century, the practice has had three remodelings, split into small and large animal clinics, and seen staff grow from one veterinarian to 10. But it all stayed in the family. Edwards runs the small clinic, and his son is head of the large animal clinic.

Edwards was the lone veterinarian for the first 18 years, but he couldn't afford to hire any more. But the thought of shutting the business down never crossed his mind, he said.

"I don't know that I even considered that situation," he said.

Bruce Bailey, a former county supervisor, has taken 10 dogs to the clinic since it opened. The Edwardses would help out an animal even "if you don't have a dime," he said. "Those people are the salt of the earth."

Before returning to Smithfield, where he was born and raised, in 1965, Edwards bounced around



Dr. Ryland Edwards started The Oaks Veterinary Clinic in Isle of Wight County 50 years ago. In that time the business has grown and now includes a large animal practice complete with a vet clinic on wheels that serves local farms.

the United States getting experience.

He got his undergraduate degree from Virginia Tech in 1958, then was accepted to the University of Georgia's veterinary school. That's where he met his wife, Mary Ann, who was studying to be a microbiologist.



ISLE OF WIGHT

After graduating, he went to work for a vet in Tampa before he was drafted to serve as a base veterinarian for a U.S. Air Force base in Omaha, Neb., he said.

Edwards went back to the University of Georgia from 1964-65 to do an internship in small animal medicine and surgery. By the time he returned to Smithfield, he was ready to "test the waters."

"I just wanted to experience that particular situation so I could see what



Dr. Erica Clark and assistant Heather Beers complete an examination on a cat at The Oaks Veterinary Clinic.

practice was all about," Edwards said.

In January 1966, Edwards opened the clinic at 4202 Bennis Church Blvd. He had one receptionist, a person for the kennel area and a single veterinarian — himself. At the time, the practice saw both small and large animals in the same facility, or Edwards did check-ups at farms.

"Some Saturdays I'd come in here and the parking lot would be full," he said.

His wife worked as a microbiologist in the Smithfield Foods' packing plants but would help out at the clinic after work and on weekends. She came on full time around 1986.

It was tiring, especially with two sons at home, she said. The couple began to live and breathe the veteri-

nary clinic as it grew and they saw more clients outside of work.

Mary Ann recalled going out to dinner as a family one night and being approached throughout the meal by other diners who had pet questions. At the end of the evening, one of their sons — a child at the time — noted that the central topic of conversation was diarrhea.

"We would be eating dinner in home, and a lot of the conversation would be about blood and guts because that's what we dealt with every day," Mary Ann said. "But it wasn't gross to us; it was a fact of life."

The Edwardses' sons and daughters-in-law are now veterinarians.

Edwards hired a second veterinarian in 1984. He had already started making some changes, including bringing in computers to further digitize how the clinic operated.

The clinic expanded in

the 1990s. Digital X-ray machines have replaced portable ones that would have to be taken to farms. They added an ultrasound machine that's "proved to be very beneficial" and an in-house lab where blood work, Lyme disease tests and thyroid-related tests can be done, Edwards said.

In 2004, the practice was split into two LLCs, one for small animals and one for horses, cows and other livestock. Doctors are on call 24/7 for the large animal practice and usually go out to the farms to do check-ups or respond to emergencies.

Those clients may be right in town or just over the North Carolina-Virginia border, Edwards said.

A team of support staff from receptionists to veterinary technicians, has been hired over the years. Both Edwards and his wife have referred to them as "part of the family" and "invaluable" to the clinic's success.

When the practice first opened, it averaged just under 30 client visits a week. Today it sees about 40 a day, Mary Ann said.

Some of those clients are the children and grandchildren of people who've been seeing since The Oaks opened, Edwards said.

The Edwardses are courted via mail once a month by corporations interested in buying the clinic, Edwards said. He noted that there's a nationwide trend right now for corporations to buy up smaller practices.

He's not interested. His plan is to one day hand over full ownership to his son, who he hopes will keep the business in the family.

As for an anniversary celebration, there was none. Edwards said he got some thank-you-for-your-service cards "but there really wasn't time for a party."

"We're usually busy," Amin can be reached by phone 747-247-4890.

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Groups discuss air, water quality

By REEMA AMIN
ramin@dailypress.com

Multiple environmental organizations gathered in Newport News' Southeast Community on Saturday to discuss how they can better collaborate to improve air and water quality for Hampton Roads.

The event, held at the Doherty Civic & Social Club, was led by the Southeast CARE Coalition, a group that focuses on environmental concerns for the Southeast Community.

About 50 people attended, and at least a dozen people represented different environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, Virginia Student Environmental Coalition, Choose Clean Water Coalition, Virginia Conservation Network and the Chesapeake Climate Action Network.

The main point of the event was to get large groups and grass-roots organizations in the same room so they could find ways to help each other, said Erica Holloman, program coordinator for Southeast CARE.

"Let's put on our thinking caps, think about and brainstorm about how to collaboratively address our issues," Holloman said to the 50-person audience before a brainstorming session.

Group leaders introduced themselves one-by-one before they started putting collaboration ideas on paper.

Many suggested a joint email list for better communication. One of the issues Holloman pointed out was that a lot of the smaller groups aren't made aware of important environmental symposiums, and a contact list would help solve that.

One representative suggested that the groups collectively document air and water pollution tests they do so they can keep government agencies, like the state's Department of Environmental Quality, in check.

Several people spoke to the group about how dire the need is to improve air, soil and water quality. Zaki Shabazz, from Richmond, came to a Southeast CARE event for the first time on Saturday to discuss how her son had contracted high amounts of lead in his blood in 1994. She also talked about examples of lead-poisoned children from Norfolk and Petersburg.

Holloman said the Southeast Community has a legacy of pollution that dates back to the 1900s, growing with industry. The group — and residents — often wonder if the air they breathe could be a cause of asthma, cardiovascular issues and diabetes. According to a Sierra Club report, in 2013, 72 percent of the toxic air emissions in the city occurred in the Southeast Community.

The only state air monitoring system on the Peninsula is at Langley Air Force base, which is about 8 miles from the Newport News shipyard and about 12 miles from commercial port operations and coal terminals. All the facilities are well below their state emissions standards, but the group wants to know the effect of all the pollutants combined, organizers have said.

In December, Southeast CARE delivered a petition with 1,000 signatures to U.S. Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott, D-Newport News, asking for an air monitoring system to be installed in the community.

Scott spoke at the luncheon on Saturday and drew a connection between environmental justice and electing the right leaders. He pointed to the water crisis in Flint as an example.

"Those government officials didn't get there by accident; they were elected," Scott said. "I want to remind people that we have a lot of elections coming up. Vote for somebody and make your voice heard."

Amin can be reached by phone at 747-247-4890.