

# No Such Word as ‘Can’t’

## ALUMNI PROFILE

Perseverance and a passion for practicing veterinary medicine serve Dr. Joe Fakler well



PHOTO BY BRENNAN ENGLE

By Brennan Engle

**D**r. Joe Fakler is an accomplished veterinarian and a well-respected member of the central Kansas community of Concordia. He treats patients and performs surgeries on a schedule that would exhaust a man half his age. And, he does it all from a wheelchair.

What may seem like a disability to some has never deterred the 59-year-old from doing everything he wanted to do in life.

### A Rough Start

Dr. Fakler wasn't always a paraplegic. Ironically, the tragic experience that left him partially paralyzed occurred during his first few weeks as a veterinarian.

In the summer of 1971, Dr. Fakler had just graduated from Kansas State University and had taken a temporary job at a Junction City, Kan.,-veterinary clinic before entering the Army Veterinary Corps. The day before he was to

leave, three men, high on cocaine, walked into the clinic brandishing guns. Dr. Fakler, who was in a room down a hallway, stepped out to see what the commotion was about. "I looked down the hall and there was a guy holding a gun," he recalled. "Instead of freezing, I whirled around to get out of the way, but the man just up and shot me right then."

The bullet entered Dr. Fakler's back, bounced off of his T12 vertebrae, pierced through his liver and lodged under his diaphragm, just missing his right lung.

"I laid there motionless for a while, which was a good thing, or the guy would probably have emptied his gun on my back."

Hearing the gunshots, the other veterinarian in the clinic, Dr. John Deam, CVM '56, who was in another room, laid on the floor and braced the door shut with his legs. The shooter fired

through the door several times, a bullet grazed Dr. Deam's head.

The men who had just terrorized the veterinary clinic fled the scene, without taking a thing. "They were probably after drugs or money," Dr. Fakler surmised. "But it was a senseless robbery in that they didn't take anything when it was all said and done."

Subsequently, all the men were apprehended and brought to justice, but the damage Dr. Fakler had endured was permanent. "That was a rough start to my career," he said.

### A Thriving Practice

Dr. Fakler's practice, the Concordia Small Animal Clinic, is located on a slightly wooded five-acre property on the very west edge of town. It's a place that has not only been his home, but also the site of his thriving veterinary practice for 32 years. His clinic is a white brick "L" shaped building that

proudly displays a K-State power cat near the door. His house is on the property as well, situated just a few feet away from the clinic. The close proximity makes going back and forth convenient, especially in emergency situations. "If somebody calls and needs something in the middle of the night, I can usually be at the clinic before they get there. All I have to do is get out of bed, put on my clothes, roll across the yard, and I'm ready to go to work."

Practicing small animal veterinary medicine from a wheelchair has required some modifications to his clinic, but Dr. Fakler is an inventive man. One of the first things he built more than 30 years ago, was a low exam table that he can roll his chair under, much like a desk. He believes the lower table is advantageous for several reasons. "Most of my clients come in, sit their animal on the table and have a seat themselves," he explained. "I also feel most animals are more at ease when you're on their level instead of towering over the top of them."

Dr. Fakler is a very experienced surgeon. In fact, many small town veteri-



Dr. Fakler around the time of his graduation in 1971, just before a bullet left him partially paralyzed.

narians in the Concordia area send difficult surgery cases to him without hesitation. During a two-day period in June, he had two unusual emergency surgery cases. He operated on a German Shepherd who had all of his toes on one paw, and two on another, cut off by a farm implement. The day before, he operated on a large dog that had swallowed two diapers and a corn cob.

To perform surgeries, Dr. Fakler sits on an adjustable chair and uses a special

wooden box he constructed to support his feet. "For a small town practice I do a lot of surgery," he said. "I enjoy the challenge. I even do knee and elbow surgeries, which a lot of veterinarians don't."

### With a Little Help

After the shooting, recovery was painstaking. Dr. Fakler was completely paralyzed for a month and spent five months at the KU Medical Center, making it home in time for Thanksgiving. He only regained 25 percent of the use of his left leg and no movement in his right leg. He was unable to sit up for more than 30 minutes at a time.

By January 1972, Dr. Fakler was ready to go back to work. As fate would have it, a job opened up for him when his classmate, who was to take a job in Chanute, Kan., working in the practice of Dr. Billy LaRue, CVM '56, had to leave for the Air Force. The classmate suggested Joe take the job instead, and that's what happened.

Dr. LaRue hired Dr. Fakler, thinking he would only be able to work a few hours each day. "Within a few months

he was working full eight-hour days and even longer some days," Dr. LaRue remembered. "Joe has got a lot of guts."

Dr. Fakler said the job helped him get started, emphasizing that not going back to work never crossed his mind. "The guys I worked for were excellent. Bill helped me so much. He taught me a lot and helped me do the things that got me going."

Dr. LaRue believes it was his young colleague's determination and fighting spirit that pulled him through the tough time. "I think we may have given him a good start, but he took the bull by the horns and carried on, and he didn't ask for any pity."

Dr. Fakler's wife, Ruth, also played a vital role in his

PHOTO BY DAVE ADAMS



Dr. Fakler demonstrates how to adapt vice grips to act as clamps for canine elbow surgeries during a lecture at the CVM's 68th Annual Conference for Veterinarians in June 2006.





Dr. Fakler rebandages the front paw of a German Shepherd puppy named "Rudy" whose toes were cut off by a farm implement.

recovery. "Joe has a dandy wife who supports him," Dr. LaRue professed. "I don't think you can talk too much about Joe without mentioning Ruth. She's a good 50 percent of the package."

Ruth Fakler, Dr. Fakler's wife of 37 years, was originally from the Concordia area. She still works by her husband's side, running the office in his clinic. "My wife is excellent," Dr. Fakler said. "She made sure I had what I needed to be able to do everything I needed to do."

### Beyond Veterinary Medicine

The Faklers moved to Concordia in 1974 where they set up their practice. They had two sons, Jeffrey, now 29, and David, 27.

Dr. Fakler has always had a love for baseball and when his sons were growing up, he built a PeeWee regulation size baseball diamond on his property where he coached their teams and younger teams that followed. He was also a Boy Scout leader for many years and is responsible for 27 boys earning their Eagle Scout Awards.

Remodeling older homes is another of Dr. Fakler's many interests. About 15 years ago, he began refurbishing and renting out one house a year. "I got real good with a router, and I can build cabinets, new countertops and bathrooms."

He also has a cabin on the Republican

River with solar powered electricity where he goes when he needs some relaxation.

Obviously, Dr. Fakler is an inspiration to anyone who has suffered a setback in life and has overcome extreme odds to be successful and lead a rewarding career. He also keeps a keen sense of humor about life. "I always tell the girls who work here not to break their leg because they won't get any time off. I'll just give them a chair and they can keep

right on working," he joked.

Dr. Fakler gives seminars to veterinarians at the College of Veterinary Medicine's Annual Conference for Veterinarians during the summer. He gives tips about ways he has discovered to make procedures more accommodating. Some of them have evolved out of necessity as a result of working from a wheelchair, but can be used by anyone.

### Imparting Life Lessons

Dr. Fakler says he gets phone calls each year from veterinarians who have suffered spinal cord injuries or have had amputations. His advice, as could be expected, is always encouraging. "People call me who have heard that I've figured out how to practice from a wheelchair," he explained. "The first thing I tell them is that if there's any way possible to continue to work, don't take disability, because it's rewarding to do what you were trained to do."

Dr. Fakler's feelings on his situation can be summed up best when he says frankly, "Being partially paralyzed is no reason to write off veterinary medicine." It is a philosophy he has lived by, and one that will continue to inspire all who know him and benefit the profession he has dedicated his life to.



Ruth Fakler, left, is Dr. Fakler's wife and office manager. He credits much of his recovery to her.