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Surprise Plot Twists Can Lead to a Happy Ending

“Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get.” So go the immortal words of Forrest Gump, the amiable simpleton played by Tom Hanks in Robert Zemeckis’ highly successful, if overly sentimental, 1994 film of the same name.

This quotation might well also be used as a tagline for this issue. This month, we present the career stories of 11 individuals from across the laboratory animal science field (p. 26). Unlike Gump, it’s unlikely that any of them played on the US Olympic ping-pong team, ran across the country and back again (twice), or stumbled into a weather-induced monopoly on the shrimping industry. Although most of their stories begin with a love of animals and an early realization that they wanted a career involving animals, not a single of these mini-autobiographies include the claim: “for as long as I can remember, I always wanted to be a laboratory animal veterinarian”. In fact, a number of them were completely unfamiliar with the field until they found themselves immersed in it (which is perhaps not surprising, considering laboratory animal science’s relatively low profile, even within many veterinary schools).

These profiles offer a look at just a few of the numerous possibilities for rewarding and sometimes out-of-the-ordinary careers that can be found in laboratory animal science. The subjects of the profiles include directors of laboratory animal science programs, a nutritionist, and a mouse geneticist. You’ll be introduced to a veterinary technician turned hotel/restaurant manager turned laboratory animal technologist, who has since received National AALAS recognition for her work; and a primatologist who helped found, and is now directing, a sanctuary for retired chimpanzees. You’ll also read about a scientist who started out studying amphibians in an experimental embryology laboratory and went on to become a major player in the quest to develop and validate non-animal alternative methods; and a veterinarian who opted out of small animal practice to enter laboratory animal science, and who now directs a comparative medicine program and spends time volunteering as a pro-research advocate.

Their starting points differ, as do the paths they took to get to their current positions, but common among them seems to be the satisfaction they feel with their career choices; indeed a number of them specify that they would recommend the same career path to others. In the end, their stories illustrate how difficult choices, unexpected opportunities, and an open mind can sometimes lead to a surprising but rewarding outcome.