Lessons learned

An interview with Diann LaPoint, LATG, Training Coordinator at the Cornell Center for Animal Resources and Education (CARE), Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Diann LaPoint talks about the tightly run training program at Cornell and about passing her rich experience on to others, from lab staff to home-schooled teenage students.

Tell us about your job.

I started my career at Cornell in 1980 as an animal caretaker, and I've been here for more than 28 years. My current job as training coordinator involves reviewing protocols that are submitted to the IACUC and suggesting to the IACUC which training the individuals involved in each protocol will need. I also make sure that everyone gets regulatory training in a timely manner. If people have not done at least the necessary basic training—in rules and regulations, basic mouse training and surgical protocols—their protocol does not get approved.

In the past I used to do hands-on training, and I still occasionally fill in and teach rodent wetlabs. I also arrange training for residents, vet students and externs from other universities who work in our department temporarily.

CARE didn't always have an official training program. We had a general training session once a year, and everyone who had started working in the department that year was strongly encouraged to attend. However, that meant that some employees worked for months before they got any real training. So about 6 years ago, we decided that we needed to reach people in a more timely fashion, and we created an organized training program. Today, some of our training is web-based, and all training is documented. We started out using a giant Excel spreadsheet, but now we track training using the same software that we use to keep track of protocols. By pulling up a protocol from our database, I can see whether everyone involved has had the necessary training.

Throughout my career, I've helped to get many different projects off the ground, including a rabbit breeding service and an antibody production service. I was also a member of our Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) committee; we've made Cornell's SOPs available online so that anyone can access them. At this point, one of my deep interests is public outreach. I've taught two local home schooling co-ops about biomedical research and gave a presentation at the 2006 AALAS National Meeting about that experience.

Tell us more about your work with home-schooled kids.

Many people aren't aware that thousands of kids are home-schooled. Parents who home-school are often looking for new and interesting ways to supplement their kids' curriculum, particularly in areas that parents might not be very familiar with, such as science.

The students in the groups I worked with were mostly junior high-school-age (12–15). I found that it was an interesting forum, because the kids were very bright, and they were used to learning interactively. We did hands-on activities every week, and we would talk about some part of research, such as rules and regulations, anatomy and physiology, what types of jobs are available in the field and what education you need to get a job.

Rather than give a one-time presentation, I got to teach each group for two hours a week for 10 weeks. That way, I was able to create a real relationship with the kids, and they got comfortable enough to ask some of the hard questions. It was great to see these kids become interested in science as a general field and in research in particular. I've also found that through home-schooling forums, you reach not only the student but the entire family, as well. By teaching a class of 10 kids, you can affect 70 or 80 lives; those students' parents, brothers and sisters will all know more about research than they did before.

How has working in the lab animal field affected you personally?

When I began my career I had a high school diploma, no official animal experience and two young children. Today I have an Associate's Degree (received the year that I turned 50), am a registered Laboratory Animal Technologist and have two grown children and six grandchildren. I've found that there are so many opportunities to grow; you just have to be willing to look for them and to step up and try something new.

I started working in this field driven only by a love for animals, and I am amazed at all of the changes that I've been a part of. Three of the people who have had the most influence on my career were Dr. Fred Quimby, Dr. Larry Carbone and Barbara Lok. From them I learned that the animal always comes first; it is our heaviest responsibility to always be their advocates. To accomplish that goal, we need to work as a team.