



SPECIAL SECTION / APOY

Yes, They Can!

Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital named 2024 Accredited Practice of the Year

BY JEN REEDER

When Melissa Magnuson, DVM, won a student award from AAHA as a senior in veterinary school at University of Minnesota, she had never heard of the American Animal Hospital Association. Fortunately, her professors nominated her for the award, which came with a cash prize and free admission to AAHA's 1998 annual conference.

She attended and was deeply impressed by the experience and organization.

"That's when I decided, 'I'll be AAHA accredited when I have my own hospital,'" she recalls.

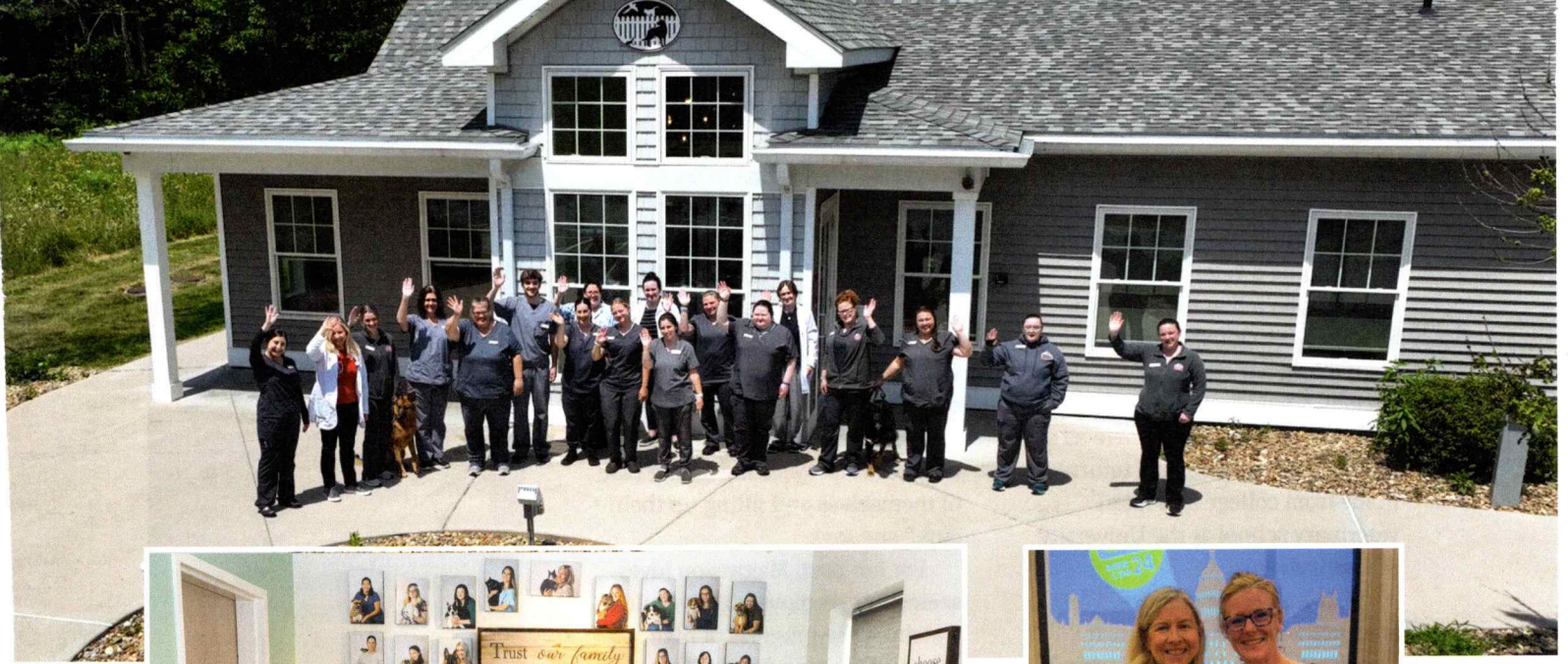
Magnuson realized that goal in 2007 after founding Canobie Lake

Veterinary Hospital in Windham, New Hampshire (after initially operating a house-call practice and working in research and development for the feline leukemia vaccine). She was the practice's only veterinarian in the early days and closed the doors for two hours each Wednesday to meet with her five team members to divvy up AAHA standards and discuss strategies to achieve each one.

She went on to found two more New Hampshire practices—All Pets Veterinary Hospital and Greenland Veterinary Hospital—which also achieved AAHA accreditation. Today, the three practices employ more than 100 people, including 16 veterinarians.

It all started with an AAHA award in vet school. In a full-circle moment, Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital is the 2024 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year.

"It's an incredible honor to be chosen as 2024 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year, especially given the caliber of the other three finalists. We are all hospitals driven to provide excellence in care to pets and people," Magnuson says. "We are grateful to have AAHA recognize us as the best because we are constantly striving to be better and better every single day. . . I truly believe the people are what make our practice special. I have awesome people, and I have awesome clients."



↑ Melissa Magnuson, DVM (left), and Sara Cantara hold their trophy.

Fittingly, the motto of Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital is “Trust our family with your family.” The practice treats feline and canine family members as well as pocket pets, birds, and exotics.

Patti LaRouche, customer service supervisor at Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital—which was also a 2019 finalist for AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year—says the practice has a “homey feeling.”

“We’re basically like a tight-knit family,” she says. “It’s the first job that I’ve ever worked where I actually enjoy coming to work and I enjoy the people that I work with.”

LaRouche loves interacting with the practice’s “really great clients.”

CSR team members recognize many clients and pets and call them by name. They also try to return every client call the same day, which often surprises and delights pet owners used to longer waits in human medicine.

Area resident Kate Wallace has been a loyal client since Magnuson ran a house call practice and made special accommodations to care for her cat George, who disliked anyone outside of the family. In the decades since, Magnuson and her team have cared for the Wallace family’s nine cats and three Labrador retrievers.

Recently, the team helped her cat Milo through bladder surgeries, diet changes, and supplements,

and he’s made a remarkable turnaround. Thanks to such terrific care, Wallace said she recommends Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital to other animal lovers all the time.

“What you get is consistency, kindness, empathy, knowledge, and willingness to work with you,” she says. “And it’s clean—absolutely beautiful.”

Class Acts

Mentorship is a hallmark of Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital, and the practice offers internships and jobs to local high school students. Wallace encouraged a young woman who was classmates with her twin sons to volunteer

at the practice for her sophomore class project.

The young woman dreamed of becoming a veterinarian, so she volunteered at the practice. She liked it so much that after completing her class project, she became a paid kennel assistant and continued working there as a technician whenever she returned home from college and later, veterinary school at the University of Pennsylvania.

Now Katherine Wallace, VMD, is an associate veterinarian at Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital (and shares the name of her now mother-in-law!).

"I truly love Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital," Wallace says. "They're almost like my second family. Even in high school when I was an assistant, if there was a cool case, it would be like, 'Oh Katie—come look at this. If you want to be a vet, this is something that you'll see.' I was always learning something, and I always had people who were teaching me and supporting me and getting me to my career goals."

Now she pays it forward by supporting aspiring veterinarians at the practice. For instance, she had to slightly delay the interview for this article to show an assistant a radiograph of a mass in a dog's belly. She also continues to learn on the job by working with exotics.

Wallace continually learns about self-care through Magnuson's Conscious Care

program, which aims to boost the wellbeing of veterinary professionals. Every two weeks, the team meets to discuss pillars of the program and to share updates on their "homework," like logging exercise or reaching out to an old friend.

"That's her way of making sure that her employees are taking care of themselves and filling up their cup," she says.

For her part, Magnuson loves seeing her employees thrive and watching the progress of high school students who start out and often stay at her practice.

"It's so fun to watch these kids grow up in your practice and teach them and see their dreams come true," she says. "I think that is just amazing."

Veterinary assistant Jonathan Gallo also started at Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital as a high school student and hopes to become a veterinarian. He graduated from college earlier this year and recently applied to veterinary schools because working at Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital strengthened his resolve to become a veterinarian.

"It's been amazing," he says. "I couldn't have asked for a better opportunity."

Culture of Learning

Gallo agrees that Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital fosters a culture of learning for the staff

The Future of the Practice of the Year Contest

Anthony Merkle, AAHA's director of accreditation, said, "This year, the AAHA Accredited Practice of the Year Award continued its evolution, aligning with our mission of 'Simplifying the Journey to Excellence for Veterinary Practices.' We recognized that excellence is not a destination but a journey, celebrating practices beyond just the Practice of the Year. We honored their passion in areas like culture and retention, innovation, community involvement, and staff wellness—qualities that make veterinary medicine so rewarding and AAHA-accredited practices stand out.

This year, practice consultants nominated practices, using their evaluation experience to identify those dedicated to continuous improvement. We also introduced the AAHA Veterinary Impact Award, celebrating an international practice for their groundbreaking work in canine mitral valve repair surgery.

As AAHA continues its own journey to excellence, we will keep elevating practices, team members, and their contributions to veterinary excellence. Stay tuned as we move toward next year's celebrations!"

"I truly believe the people are what make our practice special."

Melissa Magnuson, DVM



↑ Melissa Magnuson, DVM, performs surgery alongside Andrea Arena, CVT.

as well as clients. He loves learning about animal behavior and sharing it with clients. For instance, the practice focuses on decreasing stress for patients, so he's grateful for the chance to explain to concerned clients that seemingly aggressive behavior by their pets in the clinic could be related to stress. In such cases, the team might suggest trazodone before an exam or other stress-reducing techniques.

"I think we do a good job of explaining that they're not bad dogs. It's just a stressful environment," he says. "By taking that slow approach and explaining that to the owners, we have really good compliance and understanding."

For the past six years, Heather Spellman and her family have been loyal clients of Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital, which currently cares for their three rabbits, two cats, and two dogs. She never feels judged by the team.

"It's always in the spirit of kindness and teaching me how to be a better pet parent and kind of nurturing me as well as my animals," she says. "There is such

a recognition of the fact that these animals are my family."

When asked what makes the practice special, she immediately answered: "Everything."

The team saved her son's frog Calvin from bloat, and when her daughter's rabbit Finn stopped eating, they were able to diagnose him with a necrotic testicle. With care, the bunny bounced back and even joined her daughter at college.

The team really came through for Spellman during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic when her beloved senior dog, Chewie, was failing. Chewie was her "heart and soul" and felt nervous around strangers, so it was difficult to have to be separated during his euthanasia because of social distancing. But the team did all they could to help her feel cared for and not rushed.

"Their philosophy behind 'as little stress as possible for the animal' meant I didn't worry about Chewie being in there with so-called strangers because he was always going to be handled in the way that he needed to be," she recalls. "It was so appreciated. They have lifelong clients with us

because never once did I question the care that we were getting."

That kind of trust from clients means the world to team members like Samantha Pauwels, CVT.

"We work great as a team," she says. "It's really rewarding."

She enjoys seeing so many different species—and personalities—of animals; she's drawn blood on tortoises and bearded dragons and intubated ferrets and even snakes. The practice is "highly tech oriented," so certified veterinary technicians like herself get the chance to use their skills because the veterinarians trust and respect them.

Community-Minded Culture

A key component of the culture at Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital is giving back. The practice offers discounted veterinary care to local nonprofits like Animal Rescue Network of New England, Mainely Rat Rescue, MSPCA (where Magnuson also volunteers at vaccine clinics), and Salem Animal Rescue League. Additionally, the team supports events like Blackout Cancer Week to bring awareness to pediatric cancers and the community's Strawberry Festival to support the local library.

Maria West, office manager at Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital, met Magnuson back in 2007 when they were both working at The Humane Society for Greater Nashua. She went on to join the practice in 2011, working as an assistant and then technician.

After she gave birth to her first child, the practice supported her moving into a less physical role at reception and later promoted her into management.

West has been a loyal member of the team for over a decade

Did You Know?

AAHA has been celebrating top practices for 15 years! The contest started in 2010 and has consistently been a tight contest with absolutely amazing practices as finalists and winners.

Here is a look back at the past winners. For the full list of winners and finalists with links, check out aaha.org/about-aaha/awards.

2024:

Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital
Windham, New Hampshire

2023:

Upper Arlington Veterinary Hospital
Columbus, Ohio

2022:

Lafayette Veterinary Care Center
Lafayette, Louisiana

2021:

ZimmVet
Zimmerman, Minnesota

2020:

Manheim Pike Veterinary Hospital
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

2019:

Saint Francis Veterinary Center
Woolwich Township, New Jersey

Referral:

Pet Specialists of Monterey
Del Ray Oaks, California

2018:

Country Hills Pet Hospital
Eden, Wisconsin

2017:

Loving Family Animal Hospital
Aurora, Colorado

2016:

Pembroke Animal Hospital
Pembroke, Ontario, Canada

Referral:

MedVet Medical & Cancer Centers for Pets
Fairfax, Ohio

2015:

North Royalton Animal Hospital
North Royalton, Ohio

Referral:

Coral Springs Animal Hospital
Coral Springs, Florida

2014:

Prescott Animal Hospital
Prescott, Arizona

Referral:

MedVet Medical & Cancer Centers for Pets
Worthington, Ohio

2013:

Macungie Animal Hospital
Macungie, Pennsylvania

Referral:

NorthStar VETS
Robbinsville, New Jersey

2012:

Wellington Veterinary Clinic
Wellington, Colorado

Referral:

Veterinary Emergency and Specialty Center
Richmond, Virginia

2011:

Norwalk Veterinary Medical Center
Norwalk, Ohio

Referral:

Upstate Veterinary Specialists
Greenville, South Carolina

2010:

Countryside Veterinary Hospital
Chelmsford, Massachusetts

Practice of the Year

“There is such a recognition of the fact that these animals are my family.”

Heather Spellman, client

because it’s such a positive work environment.

“Everyone tries so hard to get along and communicate with each other,” she says. “It trickles down from the top.”

She’s proud that at the practice, veterinarians who think a patient could benefit from a holistic approach can essentially provide an “internal referral” to Ayse Washington, DVM, who has a particular interest in treating

geriatric pets and animals with chronic conditions.

The entire team shares a dedication to offering top-notch care to clients and their pets, West notes.

“It is such a big group effort,” she says. “Everyone contributes to the practice.”

Sara Cantara, director of practice operations, agrees. She’s worked at Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital for 14 years because she

loves the culture—from big-picture aspects like mentorship to being able to bring pets to work or work four 10-hour shifts so she has an extra day off to spend time with her family and horse.

Above all, she deeply admires the practice’s founder.

“Dr. Magnuson is by far the best person I have ever known,” Cantara says. “She’s just fantastic. You’ll never meet a person like her ever in your lifetime.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Magnuson is all about her team and giving back to the profession she loves so much. She’s launching Conscious Care for other practices (find her on social media as The Conscious Vet) so that veterinary professionals have resources to be as resilient as possible in what she fervently believes is a “really cool profession.”

“We make pets and people feel better,” she says. “I love what I do. It’s exciting to me.”

Of course, she’s also incredibly excited that Canobie Lake Veterinary Hospital is the 2024 AAHA-Accredited Practice of the Year.

“It’s a great honor. This is not an easy achievement. It has taken years of growth and a dedicated team that shares in our vision. Having buy-in from team members is key to achieving excellence,” she says. “Our practice manager told our team, ‘This is like winning the Super Bowl!’ This is a great analogy because just like a football team that achieves this level of accomplishment, you must have the right mission, culture, teamwork, trust, communication, and commitment from all team members. We are so grateful to have found the right mix and have the guidance from the AAHA team to make the Super Bowl of hospitals happen!” ■



↑ The team celebrates their APOY win back in New Hampshire.