

# A Storybook Career

*This Dr. Suess does not write about animals, but cares for them*

*By Jeanie Senior*

**K**lickitat County has its own Doctor Suess. But Dr. Jill Suess in Bingen, who spells her name slightly different than the Dr. Seuss who wrote a stack of beloved children's books, is a doctor of veterinary medicine.

Still, "I never have to introduce myself twice," says Jill.

Jill has worked at Alpine Veterinary Hospital since 2005.

Jill used her maiden name, Keepers, during her four years at Washington State University's (WSU) School of Veterinary Medicine. When she graduated in 2005, and it came time for the calligrapher to put her name on her license, she opted for her married name.

"The name is too great to pass up," Jill says. "There are not many names I can think of that would fit into this profession."

As she works with the dogs and cats, it is clear this Dr. Suess views veterinary medicine as a calling. She cuddles the cats, laughs when a huge dog named Junior licks her face, talks soothingly to a puppy who had his chin stitched after he fell while hiking with his owner, hugs another puppy in for her first medical appointment and mourns over a pet who is not doing well.

Jill grew up on a farm outside Tenino, where she had an endless string of pets. She did not dream of becoming a vet, although she says "most kids grow up knowing that's their calling."

By her senior year in high school, all Jill knew was she wanted a career in science or medicine.



*Veterinarian Jill Suess examines her patient Sassy at Alpine Veterinary Hospital in Bingen.*

After two years of pre-vet school at Centralia Community College, Jill went to the Evergreen State College for a term, then decided she would give diagnostic ultrasound a try. She made it to a final interview and decided it was not for her. She finished at Western Washington University, earning a degree in science.

The high point was spending two weeks in the Oregon desert studying lizards and bugs.

"It really gave me a feel for how research works," says Jill. "Now, I'm partial to lizards."

After graduating from college, Jill came home to Tenino, where

she met schoolteacher and coach Jason Suess. They married in July 2000, just before she started vet school. Jason, who was teaching in Tenino, stayed behind for the first year she lived in Pullman.

Their son, Toby, was born in March 2004, during her third year.

Jason, who moved to Pullman in 2001, had a teaching job, so the first few months Jill took Toby to class with her. She praises the vet school for accommodating a student who also was a nursing mother.

The 70-some students in her graduating class included 25 men. The male-female ratio of vet school students reflects a national trend.

"We were the exception," says Jill. "The class before me had 15 men, and the class after us was down to 15 again."

Jill was one of 800 applicants to WSU's vet school and one of 45 to be accepted. The rest of her class were students from cooperative exchange programs with states that do not have veterinary colleges, such as Idaho.

The first three years of veterinary medicine are devoted to academics, laboratory work and lots of tests, Jill says.

The fourth year is a full 12 months. Students rotate through various disciplines—from equine and food animal studies to surgery, oncology and four weeks working in a clinic.

"My biggest challenge—and I know this is not the same for everybody—is that they really expected all of my time and energy," Jill says of her senior year. "The fourth year is hard, but I wouldn't change anything. And, I could go home and have this wonderful child there."

After Jill graduated, she and Jason bought 20 acres of land in the Snowdon area and moved into a borrowed RV, anticipating they would live there while they built their house. That turned out to be another challenge, since construction of their house took longer than predicted. Fortunately, she says they got a house-sitting job so they could move into bigger quarters.

Looking for work, Jill got a list of all the vet clinics in the Gorge and started calling.

She connected with Craig Vance, the veterinarian who is a partner in the corporation that also owns Alpine Veterinary Hospital in Hood River and a practice in The Dalles.

He offered her a job.

Jill says Craig is a mentor.

Jason now has a home-based telecommunications business. He also coaches basketball in Steven-



*Above, Jill with a feline friend at the vet clinic. Top, Jill works with Craig Vance, who hired her at Alpine.*

son and works as a substitute teacher.

Jill says Alpine "is just an amazing fit. I just feel so blessed to have landed here."

Alpine has a nine-person staff. The office concentrates on small animals—chiefly dogs and cats—although Jill says she would like to extend her expertise to alpacas and llamas.

Pet owners increasingly want more sophisticated care for their animals. Jill has overseen a dog on

chemotherapy, and says she is interested in oncology, cardiac and neurological care.

"When I think about veterinary medicine in the last 100 years, the only thing you could spend money on is your cow, because that's your livelihood," she says. "Now, it's your dog."

Not every pet's visit to the clinic has a happy ending. Jill says during those times she cheers herself by recalling some of the good stories, like the saga of

Diesel—a black Labrador-mix puppy who had been hit by a car.

Diesel's young owner brought him to the clinic. It was clear he needed major surgery—perhaps to have a leg amputated—which the owner could not afford, so he asked Jill to euthanize the dog.

"He was laying on his back, saying 'rub my belly, love me' and I knew he was in excruciating pain," Jill recalls, cringing at the idea of putting him down.

She asked her co-workers to help find a solution. The dog's owner released ownership to the clinic. Vet tech Amy Rohan told her boyfriend about Diesel's dilemma, and he sounded out a plea through the internal e-mail at his workplace, The Insitu Group.

Donations—one for \$500, another for \$250, others for smaller amounts—came in.

"It was amazing, definitely enough to do the surgery," Jill says.

Jill and Craig donated their time, and Craig amputated Diesel's leg.

While Diesel recovered at Alpine, Amy posted him on a couple of rescue Web sites. A woman who lives north of Vancouver came to meet Diesel and loved him. She had a dog about the same age.

"The two dogs had a riot together," says Jill. "Diesel had no idea he only had three legs. He didn't care. It was a great fit. It was just a wonderful story." ■