

Smiling Blue Skies

Taking a bite out of cancer since 2001

CELEBRATING
25 YEARS
of **SMILING
BLUE SKIES**



UNIVERSITY OF
GUELPH

Ontario
Veterinary College
OVC Pet Trust

2026

A Note From Dr. Jeff Wichtel

Dean of the Ontario Veterinary College



Dean Wichtel and Sturgis, Suzi Beber and Tom Wright's late Golden Retriever.

Dear Supporters of The Smiling Blue Skies Cancer Fund,

On behalf of the Ontario Veterinary College, I extend my deepest gratitude for your ongoing commitment to the fight against canine cancer. Your passion and dedication, led by Suzi Beber, continues to inspire us.

Raising over \$3.6 million is an extraordinary achievement—one that has had a profound impact on advancing canine cancer research, treatment, and care for the beloved pets who mean so much to us all. Your generosity is not only transforming the future of veterinary medicine but also bringing hope and comfort to countless families navigating the difficult journey of a cancer diagnosis in their cherished companions.

Thank you for standing with us in this vital work. Together, we are making a real difference.

With gratitude,
Dr. Jeff Wichtel
Dean, Ontario Veterinary College
University of Guelph

A Note From Alison McLaren

Manager of OVC Pet Trust

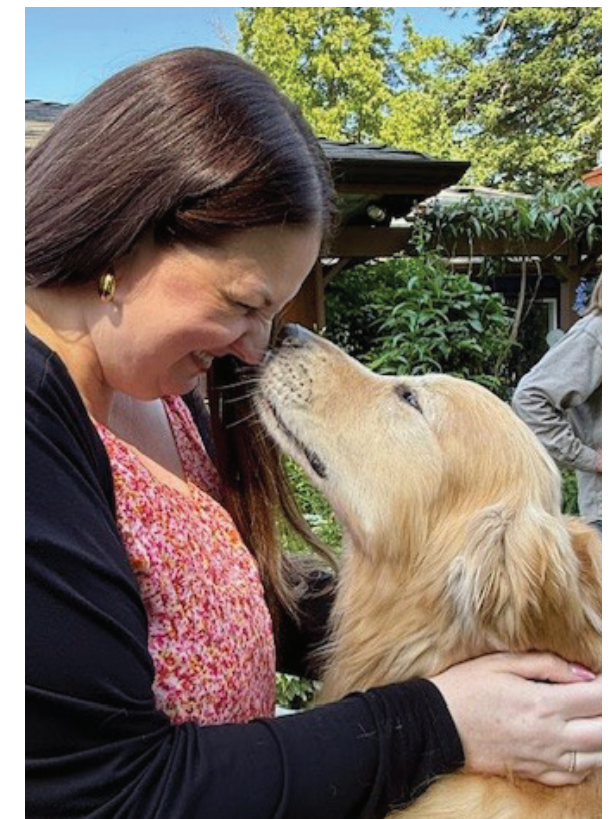
Dear Smiling Blue Skies Community,

As I reflect on my first two years as Manager of OVC Pet Trust, I'm filled with gratitude for the incredible individuals I've had the privilege to meet along the way. One of the highlights has been getting to know Suzi Beber and the passionate supporters of the Smiling Blue Skies Cancer Fund. Your unwavering commitment to fighting canine cancer, along with the kindness and generosity you consistently show, has left a lasting impression on me. To date, the Smiling Blue Skies Cancer Fund has raised over \$3.6 million dollars – which has not only made a significant impact on our organization but has also helped create a brighter future for so many lives.

Smiling Blue Skies is a testament to the power of compassion, community, and hope. This remarkable partnership has fueled groundbreaking progress, expanded essential programs, brought on exceptional staff, and inspired all of us to reach higher in our efforts to “take a bite out of canine cancer”.

We are deeply grateful for the dedication Smiling Blue Skies supporters, donors and volunteers continue to show. Thank you for helping us to do the meaningful work we do, and for your endless compassion and love for the people and pets who benefit from it.

Sincerely,
Alison McLaren



Alison McLaren and Broonzy, Suzi Beber and Tom Wright's Golden Retriever.

Since 2001

Smiling Blue Skies has raised over **\$3.6 million** in support of oncology research, equipment, facilities, and education at the Ontario Veterinary College.



Smiling Blue Skies: How One Dog Sparked a Movement of Hope



On June 11, 1993, Suzi arrived at her local hospital expecting a routine surgery. Instead, everything she knew about her life as a dynamic secondary school vice principal changed in a matter of hours. A weekend stay became nearly two months of hospitalization, rehabilitation and relearning.

She went from leading a high school special education department to relearning the very daily living skills she had once taught.

"I remember the day I had to relinquish my driver's license," she recalls. "I still keep the photo card in my wallet." Her walker became not a rental but a necessity, then eventually a gateway, one that allowed trips to the Hamilton Market and the dog shows she loved.

But the real turning point was in April 1995.

The Arrival of Blues

Blues, a sweet Golden Retriever puppy, entered Suzi's life on April 21, 1995. He grew into a magnificent dog: a Canadian Champion, a Canine Good Citizen, and a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog.

Suzi watched Blues work quiet magic with people of all ages: offering comfort, easing fear and sparking smiles. In their Bronte community, Blues became a well-known fixture. Locals called him "Bronte Blues," and he greeted everyone with a wagging tail.

"He touched people," Suzi says. "He truly was everyone's Blues Man."

When Cancer Came Calling

Cancer has a way of crossing every threshold. For Suzi and Blues, it arrived in the summer of 2000 when Blues was diagnosed with lymphoma. Suzi brought Blues to OVC, where he participated in two oncology studies before passing away on March 27, 2001 at the young age of six.

The loss was heartbreaking.

"He was the sun and moon and stars to us," said Suzi. "He was our Smiling Blue Skies."

And with that grief, something extraordinary began. Suzi didn't yet know how profoundly her life—and countless others—would be reshaped by that one special Golden Retriever.

From Heartbreak to Hope

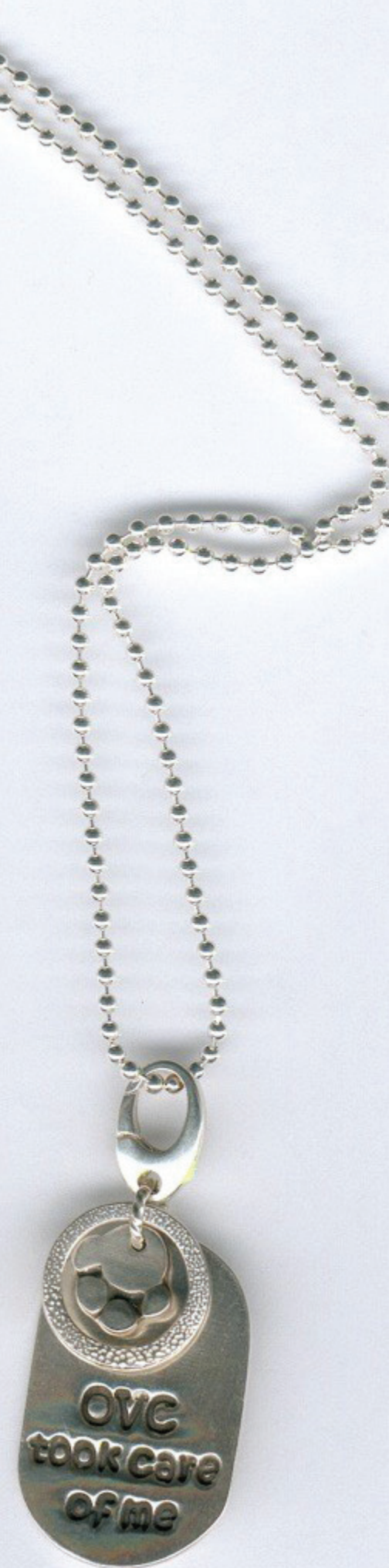
In Blues' memory, Suzi contacted the Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph to learn more about how she could raise money to help others going through similar diagnoses. What started as one woman's tribute soon expanded into a force for change, ultimately becoming *The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund*.

Since 2001, *The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund* has grown into a powerful legacy—raising over \$3.6 million to support oncology research, innovative treatments and better futures for pets and people facing cancer.

Through fundraisers, awareness campaigns, walks, agility events, and community partnerships, *Smiling Blue Skies* has become a symbol of resilience, compassion, and the unbreakable bond between humans and their animals.

Suzi always believed Blues was her guardian angel—first in life, then in memory. His calm presence helped her learn to walk again, reclaim independence and find purpose. Today, his legacy empowers veterinarians, researchers, families, and countless animals across Canada.

Smiling Blue Skies stands not as a story of loss, but of what love can build even after heartbreak.



MAKING MILESTONES

Congratulations to Suzi Beber and the entire Smiling Blue Skies community: your generosity is helping to drive research and discovery into canine cancer, promising a better future for animals and humans alike.



Suzi Beber makes a \$1,000 donation to OVC Pet Trust in memory of her Golden Retriever, Blues. This was the founding gift for what would become the Smiling Blue Skies Cancer Fund & Smiling Blue Skies Fund for Innovative Research. Suzi begins to offer 24-hour support to dog owners dealing with a cancer diagnosis, preparing for and grieving the loss of a pet.

2001

2003

The first Smiling Blue Skies Walk for Canine Cancer is held on Sunday August 10, 2003, at Lions Club Park in Port Carling, ON.

Smiling Blue Skies Walks for Canine Cancer travel coast-to-coast. Seven walks to end canine cancer are held across 5 provinces in Canada: Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Alberta & British Columbia.

2008

2010

National Agility Championships raises \$10,000 to support the Smiling Blue Skies Cancer fund. Funds raised supplied a suite of mobile lighting for the cancer centre at the Ontario Veterinary College.

2012

Smiling Blue Skies funds a quiet room within OVC's animal centre. This special room provides families with a quiet environment while making difficult medical decisions for their pets. This same year, funding for the Tumour Bank Coordinator begins.

2011

The inaugural Walk in the Park, OVC Pet Trust gala is held in Toronto, ON and honours Suzi Beber for her support of animal cancer research and care. Donations from the event go toward the expansion of companion animal cancer care and the building of the animal cancer centre at OVC.

2013

Suzi Beber is honoured with a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal issued by the Governor General of Canada.

2016

In recognition of her work to support and advance canine cancer research, Suzi Beber is awarded a Doctor of Laws (honoris causa) from the University of Guelph. At the celebration of her honorary doctorate, Suzi visits the animal cancer center for the first time to witness the impact of her efforts.

2014

To expand possibilities in future cancer research, Smiling Blue Skies begins funding the OVC Clinical Trials Coordinator position, a role aimed to educate and support pet owners whose pets are participating in trials at OVC.

2015

The tumour bank at the OVC cancer centre reaches a milestone and accumulates cancer samples from more than 500 cases (dogs and cats).

**2026 update: close to 1000 samples have now been collected.*

2021

Together with Suzi Beber and the Ontario Veterinary College, the community of Smiling Blue Skies supporters and volunteers celebrate the incredible milestone of raising \$2 million for canine cancer!

2018

Clinical Trials efforts to support cancer research reaches a milestone with 1,090 companion animal patients recruited into 35 oncology-related studies at OVC.

**2026 update: Over 1400 companion animal patients have now been recruited into over 50 oncology-related studies.*

2023

2023 – A Smiling Blue Skies family member commits to funding the quiet call room in OVC's new Medical and Surgical Learning Centre.

2024

Suzi Beber is awarded the OVC Legacy Medal by Dean Jeff Wichtel in recognition of her outstanding voluntary and philanthropic efforts that have contributed to OVC's progress.

2025

The Smiling Blue Skies community celebrates another remarkable achievement: surpassing \$3 million in funds raised!



Dr. Suzi Beber Awarded the OVC Legacy Medal

The Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) is proud to recognize a remarkable champion for pets and the people who love them. Dr. Suzi Beber, founder of *The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund* is the 2024 recipient of the prestigious **OVC Legacy Medal** in honour of her extraordinary philanthropic leadership and long-standing commitment to advancing canine cancer research and care.

Since establishing *The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund* in 2001, Suzi has inspired a movement of hope, generosity, and action. Under her guidance, the organization has raised more than **\$3.6 million** to support cutting-edge research, state-of-the-art equipment, innovative treatment facilities, and essential clinical and research positions at OVC. Her efforts have played a transformative role shaping the future of veterinary oncology in Canada.

But Suzi's impact extends far beyond financial contributions. She has become a steadfast source of comfort for those facing the heartbreak of a cancer diagnosis in their pets, offering around-the-clock emotional support, compassion, and guidance to anyone who reaches out. Her work embodies the belief that no one should navigate such a difficult journey alone.

"Raising over \$3.6 million is an extraordinary achievement—one that has had a profound impact on advancing canine cancer research, treatment, and care for the beloved pets who mean so much to us all," says OVC Dean Jeff Wichtel. "The generosity of Suzi Beber and supporters of *The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund* is not only transforming the future of veterinary medicine, but also bringing hope and comfort to countless families."

The OVC Legacy Medal celebrates individuals whose dedication and generosity leave a lasting imprint on the college and the broader veterinary community. Suzi Beber's unwavering commitment to helping pets and people heal beautifully embodies that spirit. Her legacy is not simply measured in dollars raised, but in lives touched, comfort offered, and the brighter future she continues to help build for animals and their families.



Coming Together in the Fight Against Osteosarcoma: A Look at the Inaugural Patient-Partner DOGBONE Event

The Institute for Comparative Cancer Investigation

The Institute for Comparative Cancer Investigation (ICCI) at OVC focuses on bringing clinicians, public participation and research associates together in translational cancer research—work that can be taken between animal and human medicine—and provide a central hub for resources, opportunities, findings, and connections.

Launched in 2007 with support from *The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund*, the institute was the first of its kind in Canada, combining the expertise of researchers in basic cancer biology and clinicians in veterinary medicine to take an integrated approach to cancer studies that cannot easily be matched in human research settings. The article below highlights some of the ICCI's most recent work.

In June, 2025, the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) hosted a first-of-its-kind event that brought together a diverse group of people united by a shared commitment to fighting osteosarcoma. Patients, survivors, dog owners, researchers, graduate students and advocates gathered at the University of Guelph Arboretum for the inaugural patient-partner meeting of DOGBONE, the Dog Osteosarcoma Group – Biomarkers of Neoplasia.

The event offered a unique opportunity to connect those personally affected by osteosarcoma with the researchers working to advance treatments for both people and pets.

“Osteosarcoma is a rare and aggressive bone cancer that primarily affects children and young adults—Terry Fox being one of the most well-known cases,” says Dr. Geoffrey Wood, professor and osteosarcoma researcher at OVC. “In dogs, especially large and giant breeds, this type of cancer is over 10 times more common than in people. At the genetic and clinical levels, the cancer is nearly identical in both species. This biological similarity creates a powerful opportunity to advance research that benefits both species.”



“In the past decade, advancements in cancer biology, engineering and clinical trials have led to the discovery of genetic markers that are helping us better understand how the disease progresses,” says Dr. Alicia Vilorio-Petit, professor and osteosarcoma researcher at OVC.

Through DOGBONE, a multidisciplinary research initiative co-led by Wood and Vilorio-Petit, this work is now moving toward earlier and more accurate diagnostic tests—bringing hope for better outcomes in both human and veterinary medicine. DOGBONE brings together experts across veterinary and human health to accelerate discoveries that improve lives on both ends of the leash. This vital research is generously supported by OVC Pet Trust and the Ontario Institute for Cancer Research.

Throughout the event at the U of G Arboretum Centre, participants heard from a wide range of voices. OVC researchers Drs. Wood, Vilorio-Petit and Anthony Mutsaers joined Dr. Douglas Thamm of Colorado State University to share the latest in osteosarcoma research.

These scientific presentations were woven together with powerful personal stories: Vinesha Ramasamy, an Ontario-based survivor and educator; Kara Skrubis, a dancer, osteosarcoma survivor and a Social Media Manager for MIB Agents, a nonprofit organization that supports families affected by osteosarcoma through education and advocacy; Christina Ip-Toma, mother of Dylan, who passed away from osteosarcoma and MIB Agents Scientific Director; and dog owners Kun Huo and Barclay Cantin, who spoke about their dogs, Milo and Molly—both osteosarcoma survivors.

For many, the most moving part of the day was hearing directly from those impacted by osteosarcoma. Their stories—honest, emotional, and brave—brought the science to life and reminded everyone why this work matters.

The event closed with a group photo and outdoor activities, offering a heartfelt reminder that this is not just about research—it's about real lives and real futures.



Deirdre Stuart & the Biobank

Smiling Blue Skies has supported our Veterinary Biobank since it was first started by Drs. Brenda Coomber and Paul Woods in 2009. Today, we have banked samples from over 2000 cancer patients that have visited the OVC Animal Cancer Centre. These samples are not just pieces of the tumour itself but also blood and urine samples, and cell lines that we have derived from tumours. Smiling Blue Skies support helped to lay the groundwork for much of the oncology work done at OVC today.

We are so grateful to Smiling Blue Skies for 25 years of support. We would not be where we are today without their ongoing commitment to “taking a bite out of cancer”.

-Dr. Geoff Wood

Deirdre Stuart is the coordinator of the OVC Veterinary Biobank, formerly the Companion Animal Tumour Sample Bank, at the University of Guelph’s (U of G) Institute for Comparative Cancer Investigation (ICCI). Her position is funded by OVC Pet Trust through the Smiling Blue Skies Cancer Fund. What started as a small tumour bank in 2009 has now become Canada’s largest veterinary biobank. Samples are available to industry and academic researchers at U of G and beyond.

Can you tell us a little bit about the biobank and what the samples are used for?

The Biobank collects blood, tissue and urine samples from Oncology patients to support researchers at U of G and beyond. They are used to evaluate different characteristics in cancer cells, compare them to normal cells from the same patient or similar patients without cancer, and see how they respond in different settings. The biobank has evolved over the years, expanding into other disease categories, expanding our healthy control samples, and shifting more focus to data collection and distribution.

What do you do in your role as Biobank Coordinator?

My primary role is connecting with clients when they come to OVC, letting them know what we do and asking for consent to collect samples from their pets. I oversee the collection of samples, enter information into a secure, de-identified database, and work with our team to provide samples to researchers who are approved to use them. I also help to support the Clinical Trials team as needed and supervise students and volunteers who work in the Biobank.

What is the most rewarding part of your job?

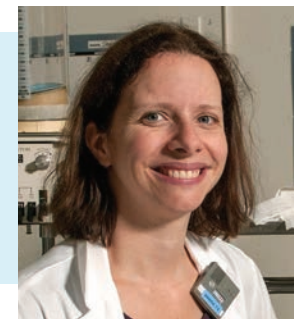
I love seeing the samples lead to big things! Our samples have helped to identify markers in cells that weren’t previously known and how they vary and respond between cancer types. As my master’s work focused on microRNA, this has been particularly interesting and exciting for me.

Do you share your home with any pets?

Just a few – I had “slimmed down” to four cats, but I’m back up to nine now, and wouldn’t have it any other way. They are my solace and refuge, even when they are creating chaos.

Is there anything you would like to say to the SBS community?

I am so honoured to be a part of the work that Smiling Blue Skies supports. Suzi is such a kind, genuine and amazing person, and what she has created is so much more than a fundraising campaign. Their support of the biobank provides us with the opportunity to learn, grow and unlock the mysteries of not only cancer, but many other diseases that impact our lives and relationships.



Dr. Valerie Poirier

From November 2022 to December 2025, Dr. Valerie Poirier held the position of Marilyn Pocock Radiation Oncologist & Diagnostic Imaging Research Scientist, supported through Smiling Blue Skies. She is the only person in the world that is a specialist in medical and radiation oncology as well as diagnostic imaging. As a researcher, Dr. Poirier has nearly 50 peer reviewed publications regarding optimal radiation and pharmaceutical dosing for various cancers in feline and canine patients.

Why did you pursue a career in veterinary medicine and what prompted you to specialize in radiation oncology and diagnostic imaging?

I’ve always loved animals, and I didn’t realize how much I loved the humans and owners attached to the animals until I became an oncologist. I remember meeting an oncologist for the first time and seeing that their role was combining everything; the humans, the animals, as well as all the cool treatments, surgeries and pathology. I thought, “this has it all!”.

What do you do in your role as Radiation Oncologist & Diagnostic Imaging Research Scientist?

As a radiation oncologist, I work with every patient that could potentially benefit from radiation oncology, interact with the medical oncologist, the interns and the oncology team. I do all the plans and relay information from the medical physicist to the patient. Recently, I have taken on the role of Associate Professor of Veterinary Diagnostic Imaging and Radiation Oncology, where I teach students, residents and oncologists who hope to work in radiology. My research will focus on the integration of imaging and oncology.

What do you love about your work?

Definitely the patients. I like helping people make the right decision for them and their pets in what is a very difficult time of their lives. The decision is not the same for everybody; what’s right for one patient or family might not be the right thing for another.

Do you share your home with any pets?

I have the most fabulous cat on the planet. We adopted her from the Humane Society, and her name is Rimouski, which is the little town next to where I’m from. We also have a dog named Kiwi who loves everybody! She’s a New Zealand heading dog, from a good line of working dogs bred to manage sheep in New Zealand.

Is there anything you would like to say to the Smiling Blue Skies community?

Thank you so much for the part you have played in letting me do this incredible work. Smiling Blue skies is truly supporting my dream, as well as the work we do as a unit. Your support helps to enable us to help so many pets and so many families. Thank you.

Where We've Been and Where We're Going

The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund has had impact beyond what many know about. It isn't just a fund, and there is no other organization that does what it does.

Over the years, **The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund** has been there when the Ontario Veterinary College and the broader veterinary community needed them. They have laid groundwork for much of the work that is done today and continue to support advances in oncology with every passing year.

THEN...

The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund started working with OVC before it had a cancer centre or radiation therapy equipment and helped to establish those things.



NOW...

OVC has a full oncology department, with equipment that has been used to help so many animals that it will soon need to be replaced.

The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund held fundraising events to make some of OVC's early research studies in oncology possible.



A competitive research competition takes place twice annually, with funding from Smiling Blue Skies supporting many oncology-related studies.

The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund aided in the opening of OVC's Companion Animal Tumour Sample Bank, the first of its kind in Canada.



The Companion Animal Tumour Sample Bank has evolved into the OVC Veterinary Biobank, containing a broad variety of samples from an expanding range of diseases.

Dr. Suzi Beber began offering 24/7 support to those whose lives have been touched by cancer in 2001.



To this day, Suzi continues to support multiple families and individuals each week. Many people have chosen to donate or leave legacy gifts in their wills to *The Smiling Blue Skies® Cancer Fund* in honour of Suzi's support, allowing the important work to continue for years to come.

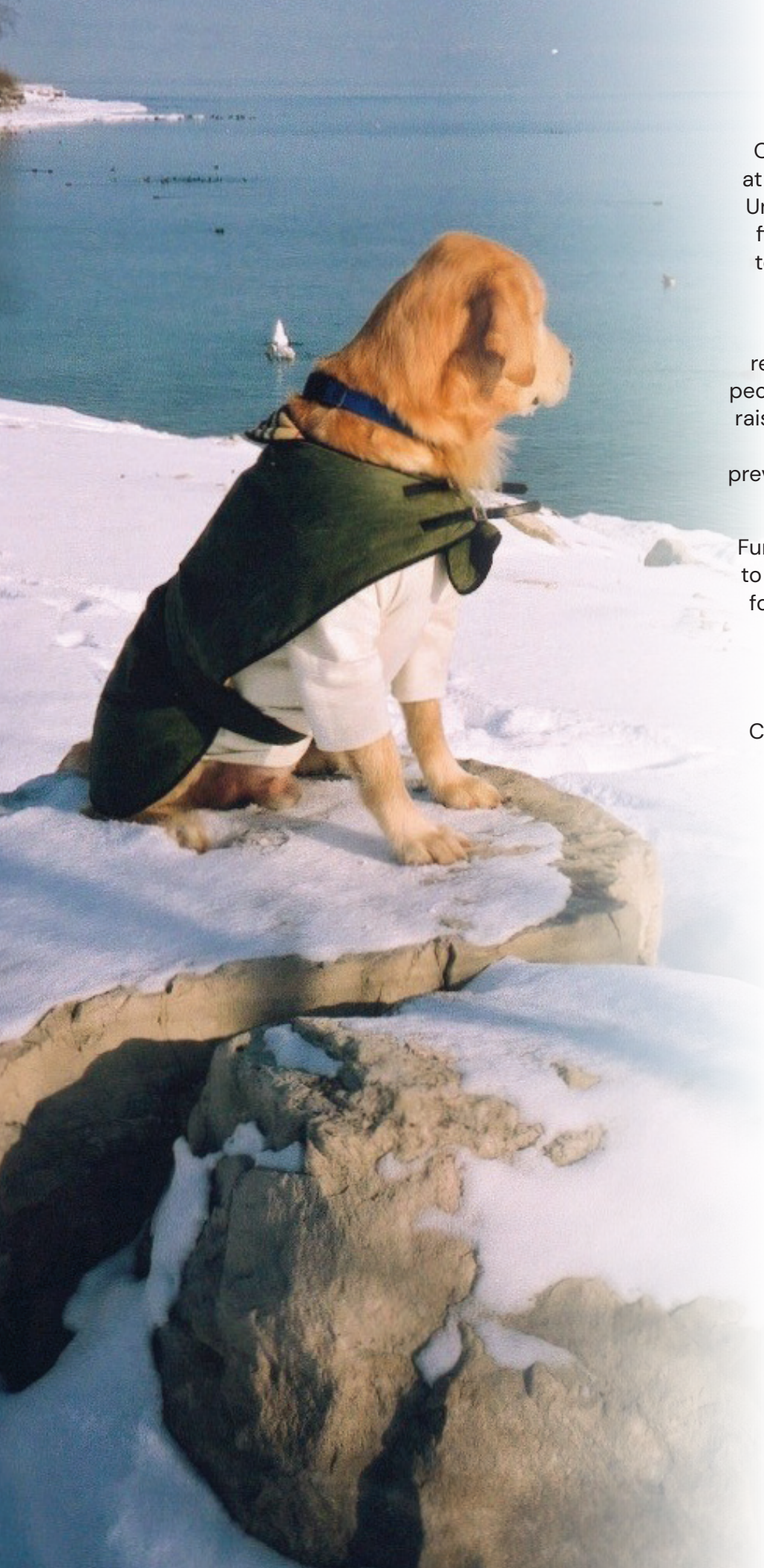
One person, one Golden Retriever, and a community of passionate animal lovers are leaving an incredible legacy. Here's to 25 life-changing years, and many more to come.



"Long live blue skies, where hope is a kite and dreams really do come true."

- Dr. Suzi Beber





OVC Pet Trust, founded in 1986 at the Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, is Canada's first charitable fund dedicated to the health and well-being of companion animals.

OVC Pet Trust honours the relationship between pets, their people and veterinary caregivers by raising funds to support innovative discoveries that improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of pets.

Funds also help train veterinarians to provide exceptional healthcare for pets and provide equipment and facilities for the Ontario Veterinary College.

University of Guelph
Charitable Registration Number:
10816 1829 RR 0001



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