

2018 Distinguished Service Award

Dr. Robert Barclay Morrison

Pig farming in Minnesota might look vastly different if not for the dedication of the 2018 Distinguished Service Award Winner, Dr. Robert (Bob) Morrison. While Dr. Morrison was a highly accomplished academic having advised 19 graduate students, wrote 12 book chapters, has 95 peer-reviewed publications, and 361 abstracts and proceedings, his contribution to the swine industry cannot truly be captured nor adequately expanded upon in a curriculum vitae (CV). The legacy of Dr. Bob Morrison will live on in the students, peers, and industry to which he gave so much.

“Bob at his core was a teacher. He was also a host, an academic, and he was a darn good veterinarian,” said Dr. Gordon Spronk, friend and former colleague of Dr. Morrison.

Dr. Morrison graduated in 1979 with his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from the University of Saskatchewan. He first came to the state of Minnesota in 1981 to begin graduate studies under Allen D. Lemman, Carlos Pijoan, HanSoo Joo, and Harvey Hilley. After finishing his Ph. D, Dr. Morrison headed to South America as part of the Peace Corps on a beef development project. He later returned to the U of M in 1986 when a pseudorabies position became available.

“Bob was key in eliminating pseudorabies from the domestic USA swine herd,” Dr. Spronk remembers. “He was one of the key epidemiologists that showed how to achieve virus elimination at the herd level in the field. Pseudorabies forced farmers to have veterinarians come onto their farms to assist in elimination of the virus, but this also opened the door to other disease discussions including business discussions. He took off from there eventually adding an MBA to his education credentials.”

While at the U of M, Dr. Morrison earned his MBA degree and was able to further provide service to his students in the swine industry. The opportunity to build relationships with producers and make the individual producer a success became another hallmark of Dr. Morrison’s career.

“One of the unique things about Bob was his ability collect a lot of data, and because of his gift of statistics and analyzing data, take that data and put it into a more useful form that farmers and production staff could understand and thereby make good decisions,” said Randy Spronk, owner of Spronk Brothers. “One of Bob’s greatest contributions was taking highly complicated, technical information and getting down on my level to talk and interact with real producers.”

“Not only could Bob diagnose the disease and have an intervention for the disease, but he could also teach you what costs were associated with that disease and how we should either spend money to eliminate or live with the disease,” Dr. Spronk said. “That understanding was a new breakthrough in veterinary medicine.”

Dr. Morrison was a rarity bringing together business expertise, research and a love for people into one individual who was respected across the globe. Dr. Morrison was unique in that he was a professor and swine veterinarian at the U of M, had close, working relationships with industry, and owned pigs himself. He also brought a wide perspective to the table.

Dr. Luke Minion, CEO of Pipestone, said, “He was so unique in his worldview, and so smart and so capable of bringing people with very different views together to learn. He was really good at it. It’s hard to do.”

“He could bring opposing views, people, or companies together and discuss common goals or values,” Dr. Barry Kerkaert, vice-president of Pipestone Holdings said. “He was a person who tried to understand both sides of a situation in order to bring the different sides together so each could move forward.”

One of Dr. Morrison’s colleagues and friends, Dr. Montse Torremorell, credits one of his biggest contributions to the industry in the creation of the Swine Health Monitoring Program (SHMP). That ability to bring different ownership and production groups together made Dr. Morrison successful with SHMP because of the inherent trust producers and industry had in him, so much so, they were willing to share data for SHMP.

“In particular, SHMP is currently having the greatest impact since it has brought together producers and veterinarians to share their data for the benefit of the overall swine industry,” Dr. Torremorell explained. “In turn, this is already helping the industry to be better prepared to respond to disease threats while bringing tangible value to day-to-day operations for producers.”

“Producers started contributing data because they had trust in Bob and trust in the University,” Randy Spronk said. “Everybody believed in that data and the work Bob was doing so they shared it.”

Beyond the trust the industry had in Dr. Morrison and his work, Dr. Morrison encouraged everyone around him to be a life-long learner. That curiosity and constant pursuit for discovery will also be part of Dr. Morrison’s lasting legacy.

“He left behind a thirst for more and taught people that it’s all right to thirst for more,” said Dan Hanson, Pipestone research manager. “He was able to teach a lot of people the steps to follow in order to answer questions. Beyond just passing on information, he was constantly passing on understanding of the process and the ability to continue learning.”

Dr. Kerkaert, said, “I think Bob’s emphasis on continued learning is something he will be remembered for. He always pressed for everybody that he worked with to continue to learn and become better.”

The need to continue learning and teaching was one of the reasons, along with his peers and friends, Dr. Morrison formed the Morrison Group; to help share information from national and international meetings while also sharing research findings.

Pig farmer Bob Baarsch of Spring Valley, Dr. Tom Wetzell of Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica Inc., Dr. Gordon Spronk of Pipestone and Dr. Morrison began collaborating on the episodes for their series known as, At The Meeting(ATM) with the Morrison Group.

Dr. Spronk explained how ATM officially came to be, “I said to Bob, ‘You know Bob, when you go to all these meetings, you should just summarize what veterinarians should have learned from that meeting; just give them the summary. Or if I did go to the meeting, and I missed the whole thing, tell me what I should’ve learned!’ To which Bob said, ‘I’ll only do this if: number one, we learn something. Number two, we have to be able to share and teach others. And Number three, if we’re not having fun, we aren’t doing it.’”

The group began publishing episodes quarterly or more often if an issue arose. For 21 years, the Morrison Group created ATM content and shared with the entire industry. While it initially began as a fun way to learn and teach, it exemplified Dr. Morrison's dedication to improving the entire industry.

"Why can't we be better than that? Why can't we do this better? Why haven't we figured that out yet?' Those were always his questions," said Mark Schwartz of Schwartz Farms. "He always wanted to do work that mattered. He pushed everyone to do work that mattered. He was willing to ask the tough questions and push for more."

Dr. Morrison had a penchant for providing critical and honest feedback all with the intention of improving those around him. Dr. Kerkaert explained how Dr. Morrison continued to provide feedback throughout his and many other's careers. Dr. Morrison was able to influence and build up those older than him, his peers, and his students.

"He used to say, 'You know Barry, maybe you shouldn't have said that.' Or 'you could have said this a little different.' But even more importantly sometimes he'd say, 'Wow, you did a great job with that,'" Dr. Kerkaert said. "Bob was the person who always made time to give the honest review to try and improve you. That's one reason I'll miss Bob, having someone as smart and objective to take the time to make you better."

"One of the things that I noticed about Bob very early on was his ability to have time for everybody, no matter who you were. Which is impossible, but he did it. He did it in a way that was engaging and meaningful, that made you feel, that at the time, you were the only thing that mattered and that is truly unique to be able to put all of that into one person. He was incredible," Dan Hanson added.

"It was just his personality. Bob was just a down-to-earth, humble, servant kind of person," Terry Wolters said. "If Bob didn't agree with you or believed your thought process was a little flawed, he didn't try to embarrass you because of it. He would steer you in a different direction and never let his ego get in the way of learning, teaching, or contributing."

Dr. Minion added, "Bob was very patient and gentle, but very influential in how he framed his questions. No one ever felt like they got chewed out by Bob. You knew it wasn't him trying to do anything other than mold and build you into what he knew you could be."

Dr. Morrison committed his career to pushing and developing the next generation of veterinarians, researchers, and farmers, while continuing to do work that mattered for an industry he was invested in.

"I think it's the internal fire that drives people to be contributors throughout their life. Bob wanted to contribute for his entire life, not just the peak of his career," Dr. Kerkaert said.

Dr. Morrison coordinated and hosted the Allen D. Leman Swine Conference for a number of years before leading the Leman China Swine Conference in 2012. Dr. Spronk recalls attending international meetings with Dr. Morrison, or as he was known in China, "Dr. Mo."

"Bob was well known across the country, but when you get to the international level and you'd walk around the conference or international meeting, they all knew him," Dr. Spronk shared. "The guy could go to any international conference or meeting and they would know Bob Morrison from Minnesota."

The entire swine industry lost a great teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend when Dr. Morrison passed away in May of 2017. However, his contributions to Minnesota's pig farmers and lasting legacy are more than deserving of the 2018 Distinguished Service Award.

To answer the question of what Dr. Morrison would have done and said having received this year's award, Dr. Minion said, "He would have said all the right things. He would've been graceful and humble. He may have told his family, but he would've downplayed it. In the circle of home, he would've put it on the shelf, and if someone would have asked him about it, he'd tell them but would never have drawn attention to himself. He would've been very appreciative, but he probably would have told almost no one. He's earned many awards in his career, but he was so humble about this stuff."

The humble veterinarian from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan went on to become a household name for the entire industry of swine veterinarians and pig farmers. But the state of Minnesota in particular benefitted and progressed exponentially from the teachings and work of Dr. Bob Morrison.

"That's the point of Minnesota recognizing Bob. He was a rare gift to the Minnesota industry," Dr. Spronk said. "You get a bunch of Minnesota pig producers in the room and they are distinctly different. They have an ability to listen, they are wise in their discernment, they are skillful in their ability to work together, and they are exceptionally good business people and farmers. That's distinctly Minnesotan. That's the gift of Bob's legacy."