

It was a balmy night in Scottsdale, in the fall of 2008, when 400 horse enthusiasts turned out at Battaglia Farms for the second annual Morris Animal Foundation fundraiser. They cheered nearly a dozen horses from a variety of disciplines: a grand prix dressage specialist demonstrated the precision teamwork of horse and rider, an Arabian stallion showed off the finer points of the exciting park division, a five-gaited American Saddlebred paraded at the rack, an Arabian national champion was presented in sidesaddle, and another delighted everyone with the dazzling spins and slides of the reining division. Miniature horses circulated in the crowd, making “up close and personal” instantly accessible. It was standing room only, and the audience was enchanted.

Amazingly, it was the first time that many spectators became acquainted with the work of the Morris Animal Foundation—and as the evening went on, it became apparent that the Foundation touched everyone. The announcer exhorted them to get out their checkbooks, but it was not long before no one was asking why; they were inquiring, “How much?” The celebrity horses weren’t the biggest draw that evening. The Morris Animal Foundation itself was.

That is the story in the horse industry today. Most people have heard of the Morris Animal Foundation, which was founded by Dr. Mark L. Morris Sr. in 1948, and many have a vague idea that it has been great for dogs, cats and other companion animals. What they are learning now is that the breakthrough programs and research efforts it sponsors are vital to horses as well.

Since equine research programs were instituted in 1959, the Foundation has contributed historically to the health, care and management of horses. A selection



of its projects includes mapping the equine genome; work on the development of the Potomac horse fever vaccine; improved pain-relief options for colic, laminitis and other diseases; a genetic test for carriers of Combined Immunodeficiency (CID); and the discovery that several forms of tying-up are inherited.

“Morris is a foundation that supports the industry through research—not *on* animals, but *for* animals,” says Laura Harris, DVM, of Scottsdale. She is one of the organizing forces behind the autumn fundraiser.

What is attracting special attention now is the Equine Consortium for Genetic Research, the first focus of the Foundation’s international Equine Health Initiative. A five-year study based at the University of Minnesota, the Consortium involves 32 scientists from 18 top equine research facilities in nine countries, and will seek to identify genetic markers for equine diseases and conditions.

Dr. Harris puts the comprehensive program into perspective. “Let’s say you have a barnful of horses, and you know that the chances are that one of them will develop laminitis or colic, or will become a cribber, or will be affected by navicular. To minimize laminitis, then, how do you figure out the ones you’ll put on a low-carbohydrate diet and watch like a hawk? Right now, we just have to wait until something happens. But what if you could blood test all of them? Proactively screen the at-risk horses, and treat them differently from the beginning? What if we could find the genetic marker for navicular? Then you could just work that horse differently. For cribbers, you could house them appropriately. People might be afraid that we would just eliminate those horses, but when the condition is not life-threatening, we could just change their management.”

At the fundraiser in Scottsdale, horse people from a broad spectrum of the industry quickly grasped the potential of Morris Animal Foundation research. It will improve health care for horses, and offer management options that can maximize the careers (and comfort) of promising horses who otherwise might be lost to use.

“It’s going to benefit everyone so tremendously,” says Dr. Harris. “But funding for the Foundation is especially critical now that times are tough. The government is not going to put as much into research because it is doing other things. It’s time for the industry to step up.”

Major fundraising efforts in the equine community began only in 2007. One year later, attendance at the annual dinner in Scottsdale had more than tripled, as interest has increased. Vendors vowed to come back next year, and one was making plans to sponsor the entire event.

A variety of donation alternatives are available for both corporate and private contributors. Funds may be earmarked for particular research projects, such as examinations of bone, gastrointestinal or neurological disorders, eye diseases, foal diseases, pain management, genetic research and a host of other studies, and contributions may be named in honor of deserving animals or people. Donors also may consider gift annuities, a variety of trusts, bequests and other avenues to benefit the Foundation. Unless otherwise specified, all donations go to the organization’s mission; administrative costs are covered by MAF’s endowment.

*The Morris Animal Foundation is the world’s largest charitable nonprofit, non-governmental source of animal health study funding. It is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt, nonprofit organization, and contributions are fully tax-deductible to the extent of the law.*



Howard Schatzberg photos