

Atlanta

NEXT ISSUE: HEALTH & WELLNESS

# JEWISH TIMES

VOL. XCVIII NO. 24

DECEMBER 31, 2022 | 7 TEVET 5783

*Year in Review and Senior Living*



# Empels Veterinary Legacy

By Marcia Caller Jaffe

Jay Empel grew up in Montgomery, Ala., where he taught Sunday school and delivered newspapers. Among the events that shaped his character was the loss of his father at 13, as the town's Jewish men saw that he was "taken care of and driven to minyon."

He said, "They made sure I had jobs, laying carpet to making mattresses...seeing that I had an income." Then Empel witnessed his dog struck by a car, rushing to the veterinarian, experiencing the ultimate heartbreak of it not surviving.

Fast forward through the University of Georgia, then Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine, to build one of Atlanta's most successful practices. The icing on the cake, or the "gravy on the bone," two adult children of Jay and wife, Elise, Dr. Andy Empel, and Dr. Ivy Empel Frank, followed along in his paw prints. The third sibling, Ashley Empel Potts, is a registered nurse at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

In his decades-long practice, Jay Empel saw "just about any animal that walked through the door," including ocelots, rats, gerbils, potbellied pigs, goats, turtles, raccoons, skunks, rabbits, and tropical fish. He laughed, "When something exotic came in, I got out the textbook. Really 99 percent of our practice was dogs and cats." One of Empel's most bizarre patients was the famous cougar seen in TV commercials on the hood of the car.

Backing up to the early days, Jay Empel nabbed a practice in 1973 in North Fulton that was for sale in a magazine. In 2002, Jay and Andy purchased North Springs Animal Clinic, and in 2010, they took over Lenox Pet Hospital, outgrew that, and built Brookhaven Animal Hospital. Andy Empel continues to manage all three locations, but primarily works at Vernon Woods.

Reflecting the current state of veterinary medicine, Jay Empel said, "Today, there are more specialties, oncology, neurology, dermatology etc. Instead of handling all situations, we can refer to board certified vets. The bottom line is people care for their pets as family members if they can afford it. If not, insurance is an option."

After semi-retiring from day-to-day practice in 2019, Jay Empel still taps his wisdom by consulting, golfing, walking, visiting grandchildren, and entertaining his golden doodle.

Transitioning to daughter, Ivy, Jay Empel recalls that his vet class had four females out of 100. Ivy Empel Frank de-



(From left) Father, **Jay Empel**, beams at **Ivy Empel Frank's** vet school graduation. Fellow vet, and son and brother, **Andy Empel**, looks on.

tailed, "Most of dad's class was composed of men. Over time, veterinary medicine has become largely woman dominated. When Dad was building his practice, it was a 24/7, 365-day career, which is what it took to be successful. There has been an attempt to shift to better work/life balances, so many of us younger vets work part-time...although dad poured himself into his practice, he was still present for games, plays, horse shows, etc."

In terms of selecting her career, Ivy Empel Frank stated, "I can't say I ever considered another choice. I loved horses and wanted to ultimately do a mixed animal practice. I wanted to also live near a city with a Jewish population and have a Jewish family, and there aren't too many horses in the city!"

She recalled all surviving some sticky situations, "Dad had his thumb bitten off by a mean sharpie, and it was eventually sewn back on. Andy was bitten in the ear."

"Dad's mentoring was invaluable," Ivy Empel Frank continued. "My first Saturday working alone in Houston, I had a dog present in lateral recumbency. He was very ill, and I thought he was going to die with this new graduate, me, who was still learning to 'practice.' I got dad on speaker phone and made him stay all morning while I worked on that dog. Once we got him on the correct treatment, he lived another decade! There have been many times where I have put him on Facetime for a mid-surgery or mid-procedure consult. It helps to have



Semi-retired **Dr. Jay Empel** consults in the local practice with son Dr. Andy Empel, and occasional long-distance mentoring with daughter, Dr. Ivy Empel Frank, in Houston.

his 50 years of experience plus Andrew's 22 plus my 20."

Andy Empel chose this profession to follow in Jay's footsteps building relationships with clients and pets. He stated, "I wanted to have a mix of surgery and general practice which I could not do in human medicine."

Andy also shared some of his sticky situations. "At Auburn vet school, we were reviving a lion by placing an IV catheter two feet from the lion's mouth. As hard as we tried, I'm not sure how safe we would have been if we were successful. I also performed radical surgery on a two-year-old cat with saddle thrombus, which left it paralyzed from the pelvis back. We amputated both back legs and tail. The cat lived



Back home in Alabama, **Dr. Jay Empel**, a track star, had many part-time jobs to cover expenses since the tragic loss of his father.

a good long life...able to run, jump, and use the restroom normally."

Akin to the trend in human medicine, vets are being bought out by big companies. Andy Empel elaborated, "The trend for small animal owners merging with corporate partners is positive as long as you choose the right partner. Corporations allow employees to receive better benefits, and the practice owners are allowed to focus on practicing medicine while their corporate partner runs the business. More than half of veterinary practices will have corporate partners in the next 10 years."

Last word from Andy Empel, "Dad is in 'rare air' to have two of his children practice veterinary medicine." ★



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