Meet Barbara Troisi, Simulated Client

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When Barbara Troisi took her dog to the veterinarian, there were a few things off. First was the consultation room, which was dominated by an enormous one-way mirror. Second was the number of doctors: five instead of the usual one. And then there was Troisi's dog, Walter, who appeared to suffer from not only lethargy and a lack of appetite, but also a chronic case of being a plush toy.

The scene was part of Utah State University's 2023 diagnostic challenge, an event where students in the WIMU Regional Program in Veterinary Medicine participate in mock clinical cases based on real scenarios encountered by veterinarians. As the simulated client in the challenge, Troisi interacted with students as if she was a concerned pet owner. She told them Walter's history, ruled out certain treatments as being outside of her mock budget, and even asked for a senior discount.

Troisi and other simulated clients give students their first taste of the human side of veterinary medicine, and making the experience feel authentic is no small feat.

"I receive a case study about three or four weeks in advance," said Troisi, "And I memorize the script and convey it word for word. Because it describes the condition of the animal, it needs to be accurate."

The challenge lasts for four days, and the animal's condition continues to deteriorate on the first three. Students must not only diagnose the patient's affliction, but also provide a list of treatments, price each option, and help their client choose a course of action. On the fourth day, students present a full account of their case.

Passing the challenges is one of the greatest hurdles second-year students in the program face, and Troisi has a front-row view of what it takes to pass.

"The hardest part for me is writing evaluations," Troisi explained. "I want to be objective and as fair as I can to help them develop their skills. But it's also gratifying to see their presentations and witness everything they've accomplished. That makes me proud."



Barbara Troisi poses with students during the 2022 USU Diagnostic Challenge.

Troisi has been in the business of supporting others for a long time. She was selected to be a simulated client for the diagnostic challenge and second-year clinical communication skills course in part because of her 40 years of experience as a first-grade teacher.

"You have to be an actress to teach children like that every day," said Troisi. "You've got to keep them involved to ensure they learn well."

Eventually, Troisi went back to college to become a school librarian. Teaching students how to research topics on their own offered her a new way to support students, and she presented at conferences across the country for the California School Library Association and American Library Association. Her work even took her to Ghana and South Africa, where she helped to develop new libraries.

When Troisi wasn't traveling, she supported college sports where she lived on a 20-acre farm near Fresno, California. Her husband was an athlete before he passed away, and she continued to honor his memory by baking cookies for the men's and women's basketball teams at the University of California, Fresno. And when she moved to Cache Valley eight years ago, she maintained that tradition by supporting the Utah State Aggies in the same way.

"I'm sort of they're great-grandma," said Troisi. "I realized what they had to give up because of practice, travel, and study time. They may not get fresh cookies often, and I

know life isn’t always easy for them, so it’s just something I do for the teams.”

That empathy also extends to the students in the College of Veterinary Medicine. After becoming a simulated client and seeing the program firsthand, Troisi established an endowment to support students in their academic efforts.



Barbara Troisi with her younger brother and dog Potlicker in Montana.

“When I was a student,” she said, “I worked all the time and paid my way through school, but that was a long time ago. These students don’t have time for that. One of the young men in the program told me that even though he loves ballgames, he doesn’t get to go anymore. And that’s sad because their curriculum is so demanding. It’s not an easy road.”

Troisi didn’t expect to ever be involved with veterinary medicine, even as an actor. Growing up in rural Montana in the late 30s and 40s, veterinarians weren’t a common sight, and her family’s dog, Potlicker, never received treatment from one in his 18-year life. If she hadn’t moved into the same apartment building as the mother of Michael Bishop, the college’s director of academic and student affairs, Troisi may have never heard about the position.

“It's been an awesome experience,” she said. “And the opportunity to work alongside mentors including Michael and (Program Coordinator) Melisa Bishop, (Interim Dean) Dirk Vanderwall, and (Dr.) Allison Willoughby has been really special. What a privilege it is to play a small role in the program with this dynamic team.”