On the path to research careers

BY KATE JORDAN

a look at where former MAF scholars are headed

Since receiving two of the first Veterinary Student Scholars (VSS) grants in 2006, Cherlene Delgado and Cristina Hansen, have continued to grow as veterinary professionals. As they have for many recipients, MAF's VSS grants provided these students with opportunities that helped enhance their careers.

Delgado's research project focused on feline asthma. While traditional treatments for asthma usually involve steroids and anti-inflammatory drugs, Delgado applied immunotherapy, giving cats controlled dosages of the actual allergen (in this case, Bermuda grass) to build tolerance. The cats responded well and their asthma symptoms decreased significantly. Her findings from the feline asthma study were published in the *Journal of Veterinary Immunology and Immunopathology 2008*.

"Being able to research this topic and have the result be so positive was an inspiring experience," Delgado says. "I felt I was able to contribute something to the field of research, and hopefully, to cats' lives."

One of the highlights of receiving a VSS grant for Delgado was presenting her findings at MAF's annual meeting in June 2007. She received second place for companion animals in a poster presentation competition judged by MAF's scientific advisory board members.

"It was wonderful to meet so many people and learn about MAF's different projects around the world," Delgado says.

Delgado is now in her fourth year at the University of Missouri. Long interested in veterinary dermatology, she has decided to make it her specialty. Once she completes an internship and residency, she hopes to combine research and clinical work in her career, either in an academic setting or a multi-specialty practice.

Hansen also had a positive experience in the VSS program because it gave her a chance to spearhead a project of her own.

Cherlene Delgado

Cristina Hansen

"I always knew I wanted to do research and this project really got my foot in the door," Hansen says, "I worked with wildlife experts in Alaska and it opened up a lot of opportunities for me."

Hansen's study focused on the presence of the enzyme ecetylcholinesterase in caribou. Levels of this enzyme are generally lower in animals that have been exposed to toxins such as pesticides. Given Alaska's relatively undeveloped land and healthy wildlife, Hansen's goal was to establish a baseline reading for the caribou. As Alaska becomes more developed, this data will be crucial in determining any fluctuations in the caribou's physiology.

"The project was a success because now we have data where none existed before," Hansen says. Later this year, she plans to publish the findings from her study.

Having completed veterinary school at the University of Illinois, Hansen is back in Alaska working at a small animal practice in Fairbanks. Soon, she hopes to pursue her Ph.D. in wildlife biology or toxicology. One thing is for certain — she plans to do whatever it takes to stay in Alaska. Since jobs can be hard to come by, she's open to working with any kind of wildlife — caribou, moose, bears — you name it.