Bob Morrison’s legacy expands UMN swine program

New swine education and research programs have launched at the University of Minnesota—driven forward by the legacy of Bob Morrison, DVM, PhD, MBA, and supported by donations from friends, colleagues, and former students. The long-time faculty member was killed in an automobile accident in the Czech Republic in 2017.

“Losing Bob was the catalyst for our deciding to look at the issues facing the swine industry from non-traditional perspectives,” says professor Tom Molitor, MS, PhD, chair of the College of Veterinary Medicine’s Department of Veterinary Population Medicine. “We have hired faculty with diverse experiences to apply their perspective to swine issues—much the way Bob applied his business interests and his MBA degree to gain new insights into swine health and production.”

The loss also drove the University of Minnesota Swine Group to define a clear set of practical initiatives and a strong desire to quickly put them into action. In less than two years, the University of Minnesota Swine Group has launched, rejuvenated, or expanded four programs—fueled by private support from the Morrison Legacy Fund.

Morrison Lectureship

One of Bob Morrison’s guiding principles and frequent pieces of advice was to “do work that matters to the swine industry.” This mindset drove many of the choices of presentations made each year at the Allen D. Leman Swine Health Conference in St. Paul. It is only fitting that the Morrison Lectureship, presented each year at the conference, reflect this mantra.

This year’s presenter, Terry Coffey, MS, PhD, chief science and technology officer with Smithfield Foods, is no exception. His long career of nutrition and production-related research both in academia and private industry is filled with game-changing innovations. His presentation will explain how the Smithfield’s research and development increases value across the company.

Brad Freking, DVM, president and CEO of New Fashion Pork, provided the inaugural lecturership in 2018 on how the business’s integrated structure creates efficiencies and opportunities for further investment.
Morrison Forum for Advancing Swine Production Medicine

Sometimes past ideas become the best ideas for another generation. That appears to be the case with this year’s installment of the Morrison Forum for Advancing Swine Production Medicine.

The idea of organizing a group of mid-career swine practitioners for wide-ranging discussions of swine health and production first took root in the early 2000’s under the guidance of Peter Davies, BVSc, PhD.

Today, seven practitioners are enrolled in the Morrison Forum," says Cesar Corzo, DVM, MSc, PhD, who leads the program. The participants represent both clinics and production systems. “Their range of experience creates great opportunities for in-depth sharing of challenging and successful experiences while reviewing and updating their epidemiological skills. It’s the kind of interaction you cannot get anywhere else.”

The cohort meets regularly, over a 18 month period, through the end of 2020.

Morrison Fellowship

The Bob Morrison Graduate student Fellowship has helped give its first recipient, Alyssa Betlach, ’18 DVM, the opportunity to collaborate regionally and internationally with veterinarians, producers, and researchers on mycoplasma research, as well as to further her graduate education in swine production and epidemiology. She also works part-time as an associate veterinarian at the Swine Vet Center in St. Peter, Minn. Betlach calls the combination of graduate school and helping the industry learn more about controlling mycoplasma through her research, while working in a leading swine veterinary practice, her dream job combination.

“I wear multiple hats and I work with an amazing team of colleagues and producers,” Betlach says. “Also, I am able to learn from and collaborate with U of M swine faculty on the cutting edge of research and technology. One day, I hope to inspire young students to pursue their career in swine production, medicine, and/or research.”

The second recipient of the Morrison Fellowship is Carissa Odland, ’09 DVM, who works at Pipestone Veterinary Services. Odland is pursuing her master’s degree in the area of antimicrobial use and resistance under the guidance of Peter Davies, BVSc, PhD, and Noelle Noyes, DVM, PhD. Through her research program, Odland is providing practical, evidence-based antimicrobial use recommendations to swine producers.

“Dr. Morrison was an important mentor and role model in my life,” Odland says. “He was always a proponent of life-long learning. It is an honor to have received the Morrison Fellowship.”
Morrison Swine Innovator Prize

Now in its second year, the Morrison Swine Innovator Prize attracts leading DVM students from across North America to the annual Allen D. Leman Swine Health Conference in St. Paul. The students have the benefit of complementary access to the conference and its many presenters, along with important one-on-one time with the leading practices and companies that support the Prize.

University of Illinois DVM student Megan Bloemer received the 2018 inaugural Morrison Innovator Prize due in part to her case study on reducing the risks of disease transmission at truck and trailer washes. The award led to national recognition for her work and additional internship experiences.

The Bloomington, Ill. native began her veterinary education with an interest in beef production. But an early internship with Carthage Veterinary Services and the experience of winning the Prize, cemented her commitment to swine health and production. Bloemer intends to find either a swine production company or swine veterinary clinic where she can add value by interacting with farm staff and improving herd health.

A second cohort of DVM students is attending the 2019 Leman Conference to compete for the $7,500 prize. The award is sponsored by leading swine producers, veterinary practices, and industry partners.

Achieving balance

Bob Morrison had a singular ability to engage in a wide range of topics while directing his attention on individual topics with a laser focus. Being under-prepared for a meeting or conversation was a disappointment for Bob. His high standards for balancing broad interests with a desire to make meaningful contributions to all of them have driven the University of Minnesota Swine Group to think more broadly, prepare more deeply for opportunity, and to focus more completely on the most important issues facing swine practitioners and producers.

Thanks to support from the Morrison Legacy Fund, these ideals are easier to reach.