

UP CLOSE

AND PERSONAL
in LILBURN

Volume 2 Issue 2

**LILBURN
VETERINARIAN
SARAH OH & FAMILY**

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A VETERINARIAN WITH KOREAN ROOTS

By Dr. Sarah Oh, *in her own words*:

“**M**y brother is named Gerald after President Ford, who was in office when my brother was born, just a few months after my family immigrated to the United States. My parents, unaware that in America babies are named at birth, were unprepared. It’s interesting they did not choose a more common name such as John or Paul, or at least one they could easily pronounce. (Rolling the ‘r’ into the second syllable of Gerald is quite a challenge for the Asian tongue.) I realize now that the appellation was my parents’ embrace of their new lives here in America, a testament of their heartfelt belief in the American Dream, and a gratitude for the opportunity for success. They felt fortunate to be in a country where it was possible for anyone born in the United States to become president, no matter what his

'My parents...felt fortunate to be in a country where it was possible for anyone born in the United States to become president, no matter what his heritage.'

heritage. It was a proud, exciting and auspicious moment for my parents when my brother was born an American citizen. It was also the beginning of many years of hard work and perseverance.

My father was born poor in a small town in North Korea just north of the demilitarized zone. When the Korean War broke out, he and his family fled on foot, in the cold of winter, to the south for fear that my grandfather would be drafted into the North Korean army. Because of the war they moved about like nomads and eventually settled in Seoul when the conflict ended. His family continued to struggle financially, so my father had to earn a scholarship and tutored other students to pay his way through college. He earned his doctor of veterinary medicine degree at the prestigious Seoul National University. My mother was from a small town in the southern part of Korea. She had aspirations of big city life and begged her father to attend college in Seoul. She attended a women’s university where she studied English literature. My mother learned a thing or two from Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* and became her own champion of women’s liberation—in an age of arranged marriages, my mother decided she would



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choose her own husband. My parents met through mutual friends at work. When my mother met my father she knew he was a good catch and married him.

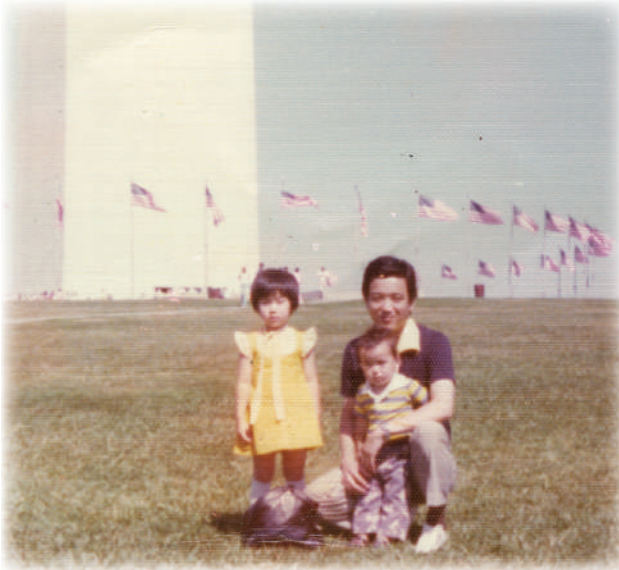
As newlyweds, my father worked in food processing and safety for a company that produced army rations for the United States. The company ended up folding and my father was out of a job. A classmate of my father from veterinary school had plans to immigrate to the U.S. and encouraged my father to join him. He told my father that America was in shortage of veterinarians and was encouraging the immigration of those with DVM degrees. My parents decided to take advantage of this opportunity, given the depressed economic situation in Korea, and its high unemployment. They saw a brighter future and a better life for their children in America, plus they had a certain fondness for American culture. My mother has always been and will always be a big fan of Elvis.

It was a long plane ride from Seoul to Washington D.C., especially for my petite mother who was very pregnant with my brother—all 9 pounds 7 ounces of him. I was only 3 years old. We arrived with memories of family left behind and our lives in Korea distilled into two very large suitcases. The first few years in America were difficult, not only struggling with language and learning the ins and outs of the American life, but also my father working to overcome the obstacles to becoming a licensed veterinarian.

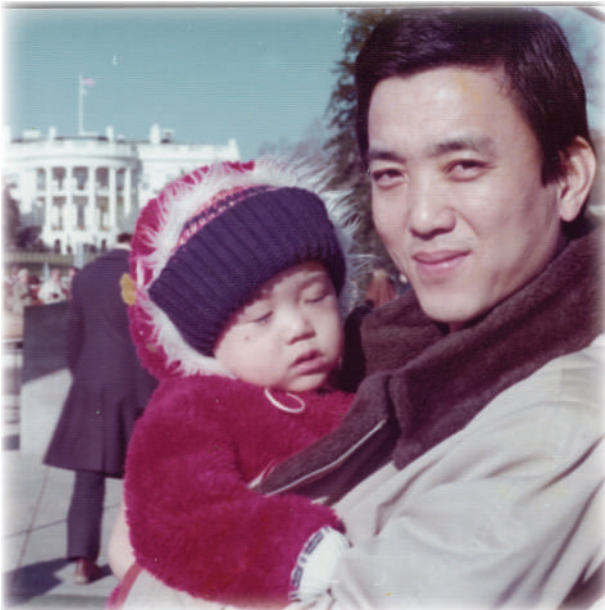
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Washington, DC was our first great taste of Americana.



Gerald Jr. and Sr. in front of the White House.

My father waited tables at a Chinese restaurant and worked as an assistant at a nursing home while studying for the language competency exam. It was harder for my poor mother who had never worked a paying job before in her life. She worked long hours as a housekeeper. My brother and I spent those first years in the care of babysitters while our parents worked. My father dropped us off daily with a packet of Ramen Noodles for lunch. Even though money was tight, my brother and I got to enjoy McDonald's Happy Meals and trips to the National Zoo and Smithsonian. The nation's capital turned out to be our first great taste of Americana. Once my father passed the language competency exam, he was able to take a modestly paying internship at a mixed large and small animal practice to gain experience in veterinary medicine. The final hurdle left for my father was to pass the board exams for his state license. My father first took the Virginia exam, but did not pass. He then traveled to surrounding southeastern states to sit for their exams. My parents were relieved when my father passed the veterinary state boards in Georgia. My father left us behind for almost a year to find a position in Atlanta. Once he found a position in a small animal practice in College Park, we packed up our belongings in a U-Haul truck and headed south to Atlanta in 1979.

In 1985 my father set up his own veterinary practice in Lilburn—the many years of struggling, working long hours and

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With our mother at Stone Mountain.

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moving around began to pay off. Finally the American Dream was beginning to be realized and our identity as penniless immigrants was beginning to fade. My parents had saved enough money to purchase a commercially zoned house on Lawrenceville Highway. It previously belonged to Margaret Duncan, who originally built it and resided there until the purchase. Back then Highway 29 had just been widened to four lanes and there were wooded lots in the properties adjacent to us and where the Rockbridge Publix now stands. The house was surrounded by many tall pine trees and was still lived in by the original owner who built the house.

Over the course of a year, working mostly by himself, my father renovated this house into an animal hospital while working the overnight emergency shift at another practice south of the airport. It was a long year for my father. That hot summer my father sat for hours in his four-speed manual transmission Plymouth, without air-conditioning, in bottleneck traffic, when the I-85/75 connector was being widened. And people complain about traffic now. It was a moment of great satisfaction when he opened the doors of Abbott Gwinnett County Animal Hospital. We often joke, saying that my father named the hospital for his professor, Dr. Abbott. The truth of the matter, was that my father was being quite entrepreneurial and thought it would be best for the practice to be one of the first listings in the Yellow Pages.

My father's practice took off and pretty soon we were able to afford to move out of our duplex apartment. After a childhood of



Moving day was very exciting!

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My grandparents visited us from Korea at our Smokerise home.

A Veterinarian With Korean Roots (continued from page 11)

growing up in small, dark apartments, we bought a new four-bedroom house just on the Lilburn/Gwinnett side of Smoke Rise. It was just a mile and half from my father's practice. The house seemed like a palace to us with bright light from the many windows and pristine new carpet. My brother and I couldn't believe we finally had our own separate bedrooms with walk-in closets and an upstairs TV room. But the best thing about our new financial success was that now my father worked standard hours and my mother stayed at home—for the first time in our lives, we could regularly sit down to family dinners together.

In the course of moving around, I had started High School at Lakeside and later attended Tucker High. When we moved to Gwinnett my father paid a special tuition fee so that I could graduate from Tucker where I had become an editor for the yearbook and had made a number of close friends. My best friends Cindy and Lisa were my cohort editors of the yearbook our senior year. My favorite memories of high school are of the late evenings in the classroom working together in a mad rush to make our deadlines. Cindy and I are still best friends and see each other regularly. Lisa, now a radiologist, is married with children and lives in St. Louis. My brother, Gerald was able to attend Trickum Middle School and Parkview High School.

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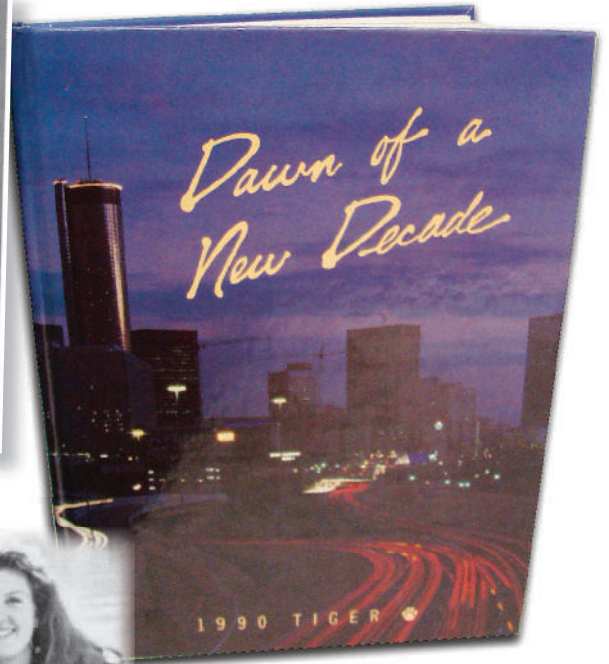
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*I was Editor of
our 1990 graduation yearbook.*



*I made many friends
during High School,
and still keep in touch with some
of them 18 years later.*



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A Veterinarian With Korean Roots (continued from page 12)

In Asian cultures, children are encouraged to follow in footsteps of the parents or take over the family business. So I spent summer vacations in high school and college working with my father at his clinic. I have literally grown up in this business and done my fair share of the grunt work, so you can believe me if I say that I am one of the most experienced dog-walkers or cage-cleaners you will ever meet. When it came time to apply to college, University of Georgia seemed like the natural choice since it had a veterinary school. Athens turned out to be the perfect distance from home, just far enough to get away from the parents and just close enough to come home to do laundry and stock up on food. After two years of working intensively to complete all the required core classes, I was accepted to veterinary school. The first year was difficult, adjusting to the workload mainly and getting used to seeing my undergraduate friends going out while I went to the library to study. Whew, it was like working a full time job with overtime spent in the dissection lab. The second and third years offered more hands on, out-in-the-field type learning. Handling cows and horses, wearing coveralls and boots, standing in a pile of manure, meeting farmers and discussing their livelihood, taking field trips to abbatoirs and hog production farms were fascinating, first time experiences for me. The senior year we worked rotations through small and large animal medicine and surgery while studying for our board exams. There were long hours, many overnights, but

never a dull moment. Those four years went by quickly for me. My father on the other hand, by the time I was about to graduate was pretty worn out after 10 years of working alone with almost no vacation. I knew my father needed my help but I also knew that getting outside experience was important if I wanted to bring new and progressive ideas to my father's practice. After several years at a very busy and large practice in Roswell, I felt ready to come back to work with my father. When I returned it took several years before the clients, still remembering me from my high school days, realized I was now a veterinarian. Always looking young for my age, I was often offended when people mistook me for being in high school or college, but now in my mid thirties, I take this as a compliment.

It was always my parents' hope that I would take over his practice. It took me a long time to appreciate that my parents viewed taking over the family business as a gift to me to help me get started in the world so I wouldn't have to struggle as they did. I often wished I had not been so dutiful and had gone to art or culinary school. But seeing my parents struggle for so long, I felt it was my duty to redeem the sacrifices they made as immigrants. I wanted to give my parents a secure retirement, a small measure of gratitude for raising my brother and me. But I felt at odds with my career dreams deferred and tried for a year to pursue furniture making. When it started to sink in that I did not have enough talent for this line of work,

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I realized that when life gives you lemons, you must make lemonade. So I began focusing my energies on getting Abbott Animal Hospital back on the upswing after many years when it operated at a slower pace. My father passed the reins to me as he transitioned toward retirement. Realizing now that letting go must have been difficult, I feel thankful that he entrusted me with what has been his life's work and meaning in a certain sense. Even though my father was a little skeptical at first, he did approve of the feminine touch when I decided it was time to update our look. Just leave it up to a woman to come in with a can of paint.

My father and I have always made a good team and I feel fortunate to have the years we had together with him. As a child I often assisted my father with home projects and repairs so it seemed quite natural for me to restrain pets



Working with my father.

for him in the exam room or hand him instruments in surgery. Then, as life often does, it all came back full circle. The last year he practiced, my father allowed me to practice as the head veterinarian and graciously, patiently assisted me. I will always be thankful for his support. Even though he is fully retired, I still bug my father on occasion to help out with complicated procedures such as intestinal resections. It's always a pleasure to have a couple of hours of quality time with him in the surgery room. My father remains a presence here at Abbott Animal Hospital, dropping by almost daily to stay in touch with clients and staff. Clients still ask about my father and I, in turn, keep my father updated on the lives of our clients and their pets. Long-time clients have become like family and as we're all aging gracefully, it's very meaningful to me to continue

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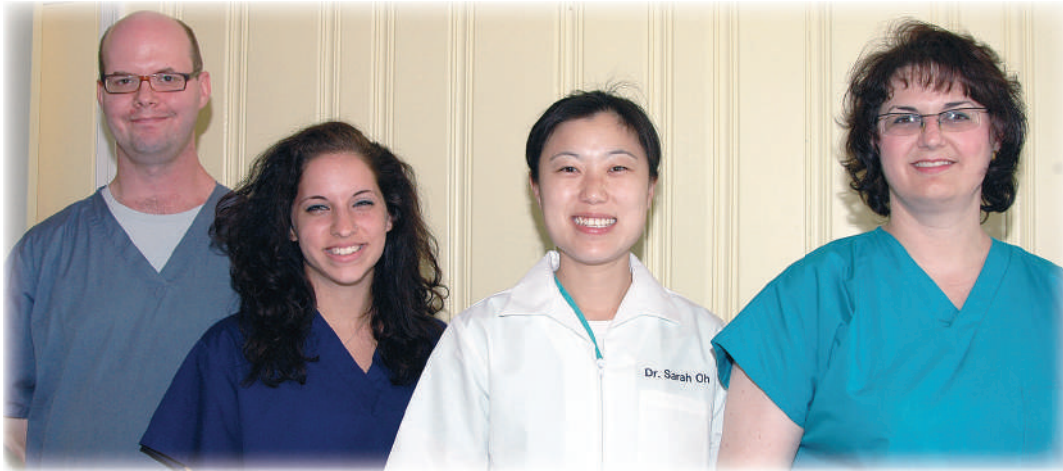
being a part of their lives and take over for my father caring for their pets. It's wonderful to be able to reminisce about pets that have passed and laugh about those in our lives now. What I cherish most about my practice is getting to know my clients and their pets and forming a history with them. I feel fortunate to serve and to be able to bond with my community through our beloved four-legged friends.

I can't believe it's been almost 30 years since my family and I first drove into Atlanta on interstate 85 in our U-Haul truck. When we passed Exit 99 we thought it quaint that there was a road named after President Jimmy Carter. At that time I-85 was just a two lane highway and seemed like the boonies so far from Atlanta. Well, I never would have guessed that Jimmy Carter Boulevard would become part of my daily route to work and that the traffic and strip malls would become part of my daily landscape. It's been about 2 years since I've moved back to this area to be close to my Lilburn veterinary practice. My brother is married and working on the second generation. Both he and his wife went to Smokerise elementary.

My parents drop by the office almost daily and my clients and staff are like extended family. I feel that this is home. That means a great deal to me being a non-native born American and having moved around a lot as a kid

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With Jeff, Star and Laya.

and as an adult. The last 18 years have flown by since I graduated from high school. I'm still here practicing veterinary medicine in Lilburn. These days I find myself keeping an eye on the many new business and residential communities sprouting in our community or checking out the newspaper for reviews of restaurants right here in our neighborhood, only 7200 miles from my birthplace."



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