

Volunteer

HONORABLE MENTION

Mary Szymkowski

Veterinarian
Animals Hospital of Peak Plaza

■ **Education:** B.S. in electrical engineering/computer science, Northwestern University; M.S. in computer science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; DVM, North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine

What motivates you in your everyday work? Sharing in the joy when a pet owner brings in a sick animal and we are able to “fix the problem.” My favorite cases are wounds – you start with a bloody, yucky mess and are able to clean it up. I have some favorite secret-weapon wound dressings that have worked small miracles on some of my patients. I also enjoy surgery cases – removing bladder stones or tumors, amputating shattered limbs and removing foreign objects from stomachs and GI tracts. The appreciation of owners for making their pet feel better is priceless.

What are your chief responsibilities? I work in a small animal hospital in Apex. We treat dogs and cats and occasional rabbits and guinea pigs. I split my time between medicine cases and surgery. Most exams are routine health checks for young to middle-aged dogs and cats. I have a great interest in feline medicine, especially the geriatric cats who have so many illnesses. I also don't mind working with the fractious cats, so I have a large case load of grumpy senior feline patients with intersecting medical problems (for example, cancer, heart disease and arthritis). At least once a month we do behavior exams for



DATHAN KAZSUK

Mary Szymkowski attends to Charles Smith with help from pet Tootsie.

WakeMed's volunteer dogs.

What do you consider some of your major achievements? I have had a remarkable journey to become a veterinarian. I went from being a software engineer at IBM, where I worked on some great technology to one of the original programmers on the proprietary electronic medical record system first developed at NCSU-VTH, to working at a busy practice full of variety. I am a sucker for wounded, abandoned animals, so I have had several animals who came in close to death who I was able to treat and place in loving homes. I've also been married to a wonderful, patient, animal-loving man for almost 22 years who has supported me along this journey.

How does your work impact patients and others in the

health-care community? For WakeMed, the joy that the Hospitality Pet visits bring to the patients are a direct impact on the community. I love meeting the new volunteers and their dogs the first time they come in for a behavior exam. They are so full of enthusiasm and it is enlightening to see the true philanthropic nature of people willing to share their personal pets with others in need in the hospital. Over the past 17 years of volunteering with my own dogs, I have met some amazing patients from all walks of life.

Why did you choose medicine for a career? It was what I always wanted to do. My father was a pharmacist and he laid a fabulous foundation of learning chemistry when I was really young. We were always doing science experiments and he really encouraged me to study math and science. I was influenced by my high school math and science teachers who recommended I study engineering, so I studied electrical engineering/computer science as an undergraduate at Northwestern University.

What do you do to relax and have fun? I run and compete regionally in 5K and 10K races and in masters track events, where I run the 800 meter and the mile. I also love to sew so I do smocking and quilting. My husband and I spend the weekend evenings cooking together and we have 'date night' on Saturday nights. Of course, I also take my dog Tootsie to WakeMed to visit patients once a week.

Do you have a favorite medical TV show? I love the old "Scrubs" reruns. So many of the experiences of the medical students are parallel to those of veterinary medical students. I love Dr. Cox's brutal honesty and yet deep down, he will always do what's right for the patient.

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Cindy Atkins

Volunteer for the Self Image Boutique
Duke Cancer Patient Support Program

What motivates you in your everyday work? I volunteer two days a week at the Self Image Boutique, and I love what I do. There is nothing more rewarding than to help put a smile on someone's face when they need it the most during a difficult time. I am also a patient. I have stage IV metastatic breast cancer, and I went through 10 months of chemotherapy about a year ago. When I lost my hair, I visited the Self Image Boutique and borrowed my wigs from there. It was such a wonderful experience for me that I wanted to do the same for someone else.

What are your chief responsibilities? I am a volunteer and the Self Image Boutique representative for the volunteer committee. I help patients find a wig in the Self Image Boutique that they can borrow and use while they are going through their cancer treatment. In addition, the boutique has other useful items such as turbans, hats and scarves.

What do you enjoy most about what you do? I enjoy working with patients and helping them feel better about themselves. I have had patients come to the boutique upset and crying, but when they left they were smiling and feeling more hopeful. Every patient that comes into the boutique is special to me, and I treat everyone on a very personal level.

What do you consider some of your major achievements? I have only worked as a volunteer for one year now, and I would have to say that re-establishing a partnership with the Caring House to bring our services to the people that are living there was very



STEVE WILSON

Cindy Atkins displays wigs available to cancer patients.

gratifying for me. The Caring House is a wonderful place that houses outpatient cancer patients from out of town who are going through treatment at Duke.

How does your work impact patients and others in the health-care community? My work simply helps patients feel better about themselves, which in turn brings about a more positive attitude during their cancer treatment. Sharing my story with patients shows that I know what they are going through and I understand.

Why did you choose medicine for a career? My true career started at age 38, when I became a professional firefighter with the City of Durham Fire Department. After a little over 11 years of service, I had to retire from a career that I loved because of my stage IV metastatic breast cancer diagnosis. That was devastating to me, because I thought I lost my purpose in life. My purpose was renewed when I started volunteering for DCPSP in the Self Image Boutique.

What do you do to relax and have fun? I enjoy walking, exercising, shag dancing, motorcycle riding, traveling and spending time with my family and friends.

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Peg O'Connell

Senior advisor for government affairs
Cansler Fuquay Solutions Inc.

■ **Education:** B.A., Marietta College, Marietta, Ohio; J.D., Ohio State University College of Law, Columbus, Ohio

What motivates you in your everyday work? I have been a public health advocate for the past 15 years, working to improve the quality of health care and prevent heart disease, stroke and other chronic disease. My husband, former Insurance Commissioner Jim Long, was my partner in prevention. Jim was a strong advocate for disease prevention and, as state fire marshal, he was a leading voice in North Carolina for injury prevention. Making North Carolina a healthier and safer place to live was a passion that we shared. When Jim died from a stroke in February 2009, I knew that he would want me to continue to spread the word that we can prevent and treat stroke. That is why I became involved in Rex Healthcare's Red Tie campaign to increase awareness about the risk factors for stroke.

What are your chief responsibilities? As a health advocate, I work with policy makers and the public to raise awareness about preventable disease and the risk factors, such as tobacco use, obesity and lack of physical activity, that contribute to these conditions.

What do you consider some of your major achievements? I am very proud of the work I have done with Rex on the Red Tie campaign. Through this campaign, we have been able to make both the public and policy makers more aware of the devastating impact that stroke can have. I have also been honored to be involved with several organizations that are working to make



DATHAN KAZSUK

Peg O'Connell is passionate about preventing strokes.

North Carolina healthier: North Carolina Prevention Partners, the Alliance for Health, and the Justus-Warren Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Task Force.

How does your work impact patients and others in the health-care community? I hope that raising public awareness about stroke and other preventable diseases will help patients and the community understand that we do not have to suffer from conditions that are preventable – if we stop smoking, eat better and get more physical activity. I also hope that the Red Tie campaign will inform people about the risks and warning signs of stroke. I don't want anyone else's family to experience the loss of a loved one from stroke.

If you could change one thing about health care, what would it be? I would make access to affordable, quality, prevention-focused health care universal.

What do you do to relax and have fun? I am a distance walker (and have done a few half marathons). I walk to relax but also because it is good for me – my heart and my brain. It lets me be physically strong while clearing my head. As a health advocate I really do “walk the walk.” I also enjoy kayaking and being with friends and just plain goofing off.