

## Podiatrist by Day...Philanthropist at Heart

### This story is for the birds...

By Lynn Homisak

**“Bid until you win!”** Those were the instructions given by Dr. Amanda Richline, a podiatrist in Belvidere, NJ to one of her patients and the story that got the attention of PM News late last year. The “win” was Winchester, a 1500 pound Grand Champion steer whose fate was a pre-determined trip to the slaughter house; that was until Dr. Richline stepped in. The animal, who belonged to her patient, achieved that champion status at a local 4H fair. Sounds rewarding, except that according to 4H rules, Grand Champion winners, also considered prime beef livestock, are sent to auction and sold to the highest bidder, most often the local butcher. When Dr. Richline learned of this and of Julie’s (her patient’s 16 year old daughter) heartbreak at losing the “pet” that she raised and cared for –she immediately kicked into rescue mode; gave her patient a blank check and told her to bid on her behalf - as high as was necessary - to win back the steer and free it from certain slaughter. It was an all time record high bid that day at the auction that allowed Dr. Richline, through her patient, to win the steer for Julie and today, thanks to her help and generosity, Winchester grazes on Julie’s grandfather’s farm where everyone lives happily ever after.



Dr. Amanda Richline and  
"Winchester"

Some people merely talk about how much they love animals then there are others, like Dr. Richline, who actually walk the talk. Winchester was just one example of how much she cares. In fact, her passion to help animals goes so deep that it spurred a second business for this busy NJ podiatrist. Almost two years ago, she started **Sy’s** (pronounced sighs) **Piece of Heaven**, a hospital and facility in Easton, PA dedicated to rescuing abandoned, ill and abused parrots that need long term care for the rest of their life. Named after Sy, her very first rescued parrot, **Sy’s Piece of Heaven** is a 501c non-profit organization that sets up adoptions for Parrots with physical and mental issues that won't do well in home care. The amount of time, energy and resources she has dedicated into helping them is all part of her story and one that I have personally had the pleasure of seeing and hearing, first hand, during my visit to her office.

Stepping foot through the doors of Dr. Richline’s office is an experience worth taking. Inside, the atmosphere has a very warm, homey appeal. Her personality and love of animals is

immediately evident by her choice of wall art and (of course) Animal Planet that plays on the large monitor screen in the reception room.



Treatment Room #1

provide the sensation of being in the tropics/jungle with hanging stuffed animals, parrot curtains, bright red podiatry chairs, palm trees and parrot artifacts everywhere. The third resembles an aquarium - with sea-life on the walls and hanging from the ceiling. If that isn't enough, the windows in each room provide a live "birds-eye" view of a narrow but brisk tributary that flows into the Delaware River, just feet away. It's as if the ducks who have taken up residence along the banks were placed there intentionally as an extension of the animal-themed atmosphere that provides a wonderful experience for her patients. They all love it!

As I was escorted beyond the reception area door to the "back office" where I experienced another whole world of wonder! The "animal" theme décor, for which her long time staffer, Sarah is credited, is tastefully carried throughout the entire office; down the hallways and even into the patient washroom. Each treatment room offers something different to heighten the senses with bold colors and decorative wall art. Two rooms



Treatment Room #2



Treatment Room #3

And the staff? Do they carry the same love for animals? "They better!" exclaims Dr. Richline with a playful grin. "I sign the checks!" I was fortunate enough to have met her staff...Sarah, Kathy M., Kathy W., Nancy, Joan and Marianne...all dedicated to the services that Dr. Richline offers – both in the office and out. They are joined by Sprinkles, a smaller, Conure parrot that Dr. Richline gave to Sarah. Because Sprinkles is a show stealer, she maintains a fairly low profile out of patient sight. She does however come to the

office every day with Sarah and hangs out close to her cage where she feels safe. Some know she's there and ask for her; those that don't are unaware of her presence.



Sarah and "Sprinkles"



Team Richline

### ***Earlier Days***

Like many of us growing up, Dr. Richline raised her own parakeet. Her love for the bird grew beyond the typical "pet" experience. She understood at a very young age and from visiting her ill sister in the hospital when she was only nine years old that her desire to be a caregiver was a very important job and something she wanted to do. Years later, remembering how sad she felt after seeing the movie, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and wanting to help those who suffered with mental illness, she decided that she'd zone in on psychiatry. Her career path took yet another turn when training for the NY Marathon. She injured her foot...and saw a podiatrist who specialized in running and injuries. This DPM treated her injuries, put her into a pair of orthotics to stabilize her feet and today she credits him for her current love of podiatry. That DPM was Dr. Neal Kramer (of Bethlehem, PA) who Dr. Richline says "was and still is my mentor today and the reason I entered podiatry."

### ***The Sanctuary***

Patients, friends and family near and far know about Dr. Richline's Parrot Sanctuary to the point that when they hear about a disadvantaged bird they come to her, knowing she will take them under her wing. How did this all get started? Before she tells the story, she enlightens me with a brief background of parrots. She explains how some large parrot species, like large cockatoos, Amazons, and macaws, have very long life spans with 80 years being reported and record ages of over one hundred. One reason that many of them need to be re-homed during the course of their lives is because they often outlive their owners. Another is because some find them to be less than desirable house mates than originally thought due to the fact that they can let out loud squawks – an innate protective reaction learned from living in the rain forests (their

natural habitat) to warn other parrots of danger. These characteristics make home settings not typically the *best* settings for them and the people that buy them many times don't realize this about their new "pet." Neither do they realize that they require lots of attention and can be very expensive to care for and the outcome, more often than not, is that the birds get the short end of the stick. The owners give up caring for them and tend to ignore them to the point of neglect or even abuse.

Dr. Richline experienced for herself the responsibilities that come with owning and caring for these birds as she tells of her first rescued parrot back when she was in college. She was working in a nursing home when a staff person told her about a local drug bust where authorities also discovered an abused parrot. Dr. Richline followed the story and ended up rescuing the parrot, named him Sy and from that point forward, until today, has become a permanent part of her life. Sy moved with her when she entered podiatry school at the Pennsylvania College of Podiatric Medicine in Philadelphia (now TUSPM), and everyone at the school got to know him. In fact, even today when she meets many of her PCPM schoolmates at various conferences, they still remember to ask about Sy, who is still going strong at the estimated age of 52.

***There are bird houses...then there are BIRD HOUSES!***

Twelve years ago, when Dr. Richline opened her podiatry practice in Belvidere, she made a house call to one of her patients who was suffering from ulcerations and had great difficulty ambulating. During the visit, she learned that he owned a number of parrots, but because his health prevented him from caring for them, they were neglected. Dr. Richline kept watch over one bird in particular, a scarlet macaw, and each time she visited she'd bring treats. Her patient was touched by the connection. Feeling comfortable with how she and the bird interacted and realizing he could entrust Dr. Richline to care for it, he gave it to her for Christmas. It wasn't too much longer after her gifted parrot, who she named Baby Christmas, came to live with her that she inherited all twenty-five of his birds. The question now was...where exactly did she figure on putting 25 large loud parrots? Understanding of her desire to provide a home for these birds, her loving, contractor husband-to-be built them a bird house. Not your typical birdhouse, but a 2500 sq. ft. parrot hotel. Little did he realize that his labor of love would end up being phase one and he would soon be adding another ... wing. (pun intended)

Today, explains Dr. Richline, the "house" has turned into what they now call "a large nursing home for birds." An additional 1500 sq. feet were added to the Sanctuary to create an onsite hospital unit and it contains every piece of equipment imaginable to take care of them – from an Emergency Room to a placement (by adoption only) service and everything in between; x-ray, intubation and anesthesia equipment, an oxygen chamber, autoclave, etc. It is staffed with

2 full time employees and when needed, a vet is flown in (from Connecticut). Dr. Richline works very closely with the ASPCA to maintain this Sanctuary and her devotion to it is nothing short of a miracle for these animals. Her selfless efforts and resources allow the sanctuary to operate and care for its now 104 residents. She has set up very generous trusts to ensure that the sanctuary continues long after she is gone.

She makes it all sound so easy, but make no mistake...caring for these birds is hard work and comes with plenty of emotional highs and lows. "The joy of rehabilitation," she says, "can often be offset by seeing one suffer and then die in your arms." If you ask her about any one of her birds, she can rattle off the story of how she got them. Otis's owner was sent to a nursing home leaving the bird with the son who hated it. Mishka and Frito belonged to patients of hers who lost them home. Casper and Birdie were neglected but when they met at the Sanctuary they fell in love and are now inseparable. Daisy was rescued from a crack house in Newark, NJ and she was traded in a drug deal. (Her environment taught her to growl like a vicious dog when anyone comes in.) She nursed Mr. Kato back to health after he suffered with Psittacosis and Gourdy was literally thrown out by his owner, brought to a shelter and was to be euthanized because of his "viciousness." Dr. Richline maintains..."He is far from vicious!"

Her most rewarding experience was an abused Moluccan Cockatoo who was found bleeding to death with open wounds after the owner's place (a hoarder) was shut down. When she heard of this, she grabbed the bird and rushed him to the vet. She admitted that she never thought her background in wound care would one day help rehabilitate parrots, but it did and 6 months later, the bird, left with a damaged nerve and crippled leg, was healed of its wounds. Another story she shared with me took place in Kauai where she traveled as part of a volunteer rescue effort involving a rare, almost extinct Hawaiian bird. "These baby birds," she explained, "are conditioned to fly towards the light of the moon; however many become disoriented with all the hotel lights and wind up crashing, getting injured and die." Just as she was about to leave the island, she learned of a fledgling found injured on a cliff on the water's edge in a restricted area that had previously taken the lives of 24 people. She asked her husband, who has always been supportive of her bird rescue, to drive her there. Hoping from one jagged lava rock to another, while holding on to the hazardous cliff's edge and simultaneously getting clobbered with ocean waves smacking up against the cliff's walls, she spotted and snatched up the hurt and dehydrated baby bird and returned to safety. After Dr. Richline gave the bird immediate care, she handed it over to the local fire department who worked closely with the rescue facility to bring it back to health. Now THAT is a trip to Hawaii that will not be too soon forgotten!

### ***A Balancing Act***

With two very successful businesses, Dr. Richline admits it can sometimes be challenging to balance all her activities; sometimes even a bit overwhelming. She's in her office Monday-Saturday beginning at 6am (patients start at 6:30am) and also spends time seeing patients at the wound care center. At the end of *every* day, regardless of what time that is, she dedicates three hours to the Sanctuary and the remainder of her evenings belongs to her and her husband. "It's very important to me that my office runs smoothly," she says, "because my life *needs* to be so time managed. If I run late in the office...it has a domino effect on the rest of my day and on my life. I'd like to spend some time working out and I *don't* want to be dictating charts during the time I get to spend with my husband. He's very supportive of my work and very patient with my time constraints, but it's not fair to either one of us." She has recently introduced EHR and a scribe into her podiatry practice – a step towards eliminating home dictation and increasing practice efficiency.

### ***WHY!?***

I asked her why she does it. Why deal with all the added pressure of having the Sanctuary when she already has a successful podiatry practice? She didn't even hesitate in her response. "I **LOVE** it!" she said as her voice and face lit up. "There are no words for how rewarding it is! I get back so much more than I give!"

### ***Lessons learned: Patience and Caring***

One of the most important things these birds have taught me has actually crossed over into my podiatry world. I learned how to have an enormous amount of patience with my patients. When I see the frightened look in some of my patient's eyes (particularly children) prior to administering an injection or performing a procedure, I can feel what they are feeling because it's very similar to the apprehension I see in my injured bird's eyes when I care for them. I've learned that before I can calm my patients or my birds enough to care for them, they have to trust me. And they do."



Dr. Richline and "friends"

"They also taught me about caring." Dr. Richline said, "The best doctors – be they podiatrists, pediatricians, cardiologists...whatever – are the best doctors because they enjoy what they do – and they truly CARE about their patients. That's how I feel about what I do." Her comment reinforced something I've always believed in and continue to preach at every opportunity. Only today, as I sat and listened to Dr. Richline speak and I saw that joy for myself in her face, it all came to life. There was little difference in her going home to care for her parrots as there is

someone else going home to care for their family. She explained to me that “Some of the birds I take in have severe psychological or physical issues; many of them would be dead if I didn’t reach out to them,” and I thought although she never became a psychiatrist like she thought she might one day be; caring for a mentally/emotionally compromised patient took on a whole new meaning. “They are not all the “cream of the crop” birds and some are not ever likely to be adopted,” she lamented. “But they will always have a place here in my Sanctuary.”

Dr. Amanda Richline has a heartfelt passion for what she does...she’s altruistically humane and that is a huge gift to humanity. A real life healer.

You can visit “Sy’s Piece of Heaven” at their website... [www.syspieceofheaven.org](http://www.syspieceofheaven.org)

*Ms. Homisak, President of SOS Healthcare Management Solutions, has a Certificate in Human Resource Studies from Cornell University School of Industry and Labor Relations. She is the 2010 recipient of Podiatry Management’s Lifetime Achievement Award and recently inducted into the PM Hall of Fame. Lynn is also an Editorial Advisor for Podiatry Management Magazine and recognized nationwide as a speaker, writer and expert in staff and human resource management.*