

# Teaching by Example: The Legacy of Dr. R.K. Anderson

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*Dr. R.K. Anderson and Walter*

**T**he man walked with purpose, slightly stooped, firmly grasping his cane that also served as a stool. Every now and again he would interrupt his stride to shake a colleague's hand or warmly embrace a friend. R.K. Anderson, DVM, MPH, DACVB, DACVPM, was easy to spot at APDT and other conferences. He always left a wake of genuine smiles in his path.

Anderson passed away October 18, 2012, at the age of 90. He was an internationally recognized teacher, speaker, author, practitioner and consultant in the fields of veterinary public health, animal behavior and human-animal relationships. He was a founder of Pet Partners (formerly Delta Society), an international nonprofit organization that promotes the human-animal bond. He also co-founded the Center to Study Human Animal Relationships and Environments (CENSHARE), which conducts research and disseminates information on human-animal relationships and their effects on human well-being. Anderson authored or co-authored more

than 75 scientific papers related to veterinary medicine, veterinary public health and the human and companion animal bond, and earned numerous prestigious awards for his endeavors. Anderson was also well known for revolutionizing canine training tools with his co-inventions, the Gentle Leader® Headcollar and Easy Walk™ Harness.

Anderson was a student throughout his life, diligently attending conferences and seminars, studiously taking notes during each session. He was also a generous teacher to scores of pet professionals who drew inspiration from this remarkable man.

“Not many people truly change your life, but R.K. certainly changed mine,” says Duffer Schultz of Plymouth, MN. “While my wife worked in the field of animal behavior and care, I had no real connection to it, nor any significant understanding of it. But R.K.'s vision and his sheer force of will was enough to get me in.”

Schultz recalls their introduction through his wife, trainer Becky Schultz. “At that time she was manager of behavior and training at the Animal Humane Society, in Golden Valley, MN,” he says. “On a return trip from Iowa State, where they gave a presentation to vet students on the Gentle Leader, they were talking about the use of videos to help people see various aspects of animal behavior, and how different professionals approach and deal with these issues. I’ve run a small media production business for 30 years, and Becky suggested that I might be able to help.”

“R.K. sketched out a rough vision, and with not much of a plan, we spent much of the next several years traveling to his colleagues around the country, filming how they worked, and talking with them about animal behavior. As we collected hundreds of hours of material, we explored various ways of using it, and finally settled on creating a website to offer these videos for free. We formed the non-profit Animal Behavior Resources Institute, Inc., and continued to create more material.”

“We never really knew exactly what we were doing, but shared a common faith in the ultimate value of pursuing what seems like a good idea. Through R.K., I went from someone who knew next to nothing about animals to someone who met and learned from the very best practitioners in the world. As I adapted and modified my skills, I learned how to work with animals, to see what was important from a behavior standpoint, and how to capture and present a coherent story that could help other professionals and pet owners understand their animals better. This led to related work with the American Humane Society, which in turn led to repeated deployments with the ASPCA’s Field Investigative Response team. Today, a significant part of my business comes from the animal field.”

Although Anderson was renowned in the industry, he had a way of making others feel important. Jennifer White, all-species animal behavior consultant, and flower essence and BRT practitioner of Seattle, WA, remembers meeting Anderson for the first time while working with Dr. Amy Marder, an Anderson protégé and former student, in developing the country’s first positive shelter dog training classes. They were also working with aggressive dogs incarcerated for legal cases. She recalls, “We had our hands full. R.K. brought us the Promise Headcollar, the Gentle Leader’s forerunner, and it was much appreciated and saved quite a few dogs’ lives!”

At the time, R.K. and the head halter’s co-inventor, Ruth Foster, were traveling around the country teaching select dog trainers on proper fit and use of the new training tool. “When Steve [White] and I opened our Seattle area No Force/No Fear training facility, R.K. came for a visit to film dogs learning to wear the Gentle Leader and talk about the future of dog training. What an honor!”



Dr. R.K. Anderson and Teoti Anderson

Steve Dale, dog/cat behavior consultant, syndicated columnist and radio host in Chicago, IL, fondly recalls Anderson’s humble nature upon their first meeting at the Western Veterinary Conference speakers’ room more than a decade ago. Steve says, “He grabbed my hand — and he was a pretty strong guy — and said ‘My name is R.K. Anderson.’”

“I said, ‘I know. It’s an honor to meet you, I’m Steve Dale.’”

“His response was, ‘I know. But it’s my honor to meet *you!*’ I was amazed he had any idea. From that year forward, whenever we were at the same conference, he always ... and I mean *always* ... made it a point to hear me speak. R.K. didn’t only teach positive reinforcement to our pets, he lived that approach. And as a result, whenever he called — the answer was yes.”

While Anderson often praised his colleagues publicly, sometimes it was the personal calls that had the greatest impact. Marjie Alonso, CDBC, CPDT-KA, KPA CTP, of Boston, MA, shares, “During an especially difficult time, during some organizational strife, R.K. called and left a message on my phone telling me that I was doing a good job, thanking me for my efforts and telling me to keep up the good work. It was not the first time he’d left an encouraging message on my phone in the thick of things that weren’t necessarily pleasant or fun, and I could not believe that this man, who really barely knew me, not only knew what was going on, but took the time to reach out and offer a kind and supportive word. How important to notice things, to notice people and what they’re doing, to reach out, even to relative strangers to offer encouragement or a hello. He offered a model of working toward encouragement, of being interested, of being kind and of being strong.”

Anderson had a gift for communicating and inspiring pet professionals across a spectrum of training  
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methodologies. Schultz says the most important lesson he learned from Anderson was the power of relationships. He says, “R.K. worked exceedingly hard to develop and nurture these relationships. Whether they were ‘old guard’ behaviorists from the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, or young vet students or trainers, he was always there with advice and support, and an uncanny knack for inspiring people to do their very best. He had the ability to stay above the fray of political in-fighting so common in this industry, but was also tremendously influential and not above some late-night prodding and negotiations. In fact, his reputation and network were so vast I called him the Golden Key, since he could open just about any door.”

Alonso agrees. “R.K. was elegant,” she says. “While we didn’t always agree on everything, he was a quintessential statesman and gentleman. He was powerful, even forceful, but never a bully, never mean-spirited, always giving, warm, and so very incredibly *interested* in everything and everyone. He was brilliant, and he was kind, and he had strong beliefs. In R.K. I found a model of respectful purpose — that indefatigable effort and adherence to a mission or cause can be done with a firm hand, but a friendly smile. The man just never seemed to get tired, and I suspect that’s in part because he didn’t fight *against* things, so much as *for* them. He was a champion of his causes, and that positivity allowed him to live without entrenchment; it allowed his heart and his mind to remain open and welcoming to new people and ideas while still working toward his own ideals. What a gift — and what a model to strive for!”

While people often benefitted from Anderson’s experience and insight, countless pets benefitted, too. Dale’s favorite memory was when he mentioned to Anderson in passing that he and his wife had recently adopted a mixed breed puppy from Chicago Animal Care and Control. He shares, “I told R.K. she was pulling on the Gentle Leader. ‘You’re doing it wrong,’ he said. I agreed, I likely was doing something wrong. He offered to come to Chicago — in the winter — to show me how to do it right. The next week. He lived in Minneapolis, not exactly across the street. Sure enough, he and Duffer Schultz arrived — with a video camera to record for [www.abrionline.org](http://www.abrionline.org). R.K. Anderson training your dog, can you imagine? A Chicago dog trainer, Jamie Damato, was there. I told her I would never wash our dog again.”

White adds, “I also appreciated R.K.’s demonstrated faith in the dog’s ability to figure out challenges. If the person is fair and sets up the dog for success, the dog ALWAYS gets it. R.K.’s positivity and irrepressible drive

to change the world of dog training were inspiring, especially when I faced organizational quagmires in my quest to develop new teaching approaches for instructors and professional trainers. Thinking of R.K., I could demand high standards and continual growth, knowing that when expected, anything is possible.”

Dale also shares that while R.K. was renowned for working with dogs, he also had a soft spot for cats. “What R.K. was most pleased about and interested in was watching how I fed our cat Roxy out of treat balls, and in various feed stations around the house. He LOVED it,” he says. “He wanted to do much more with cats than he ever had the opportunity for. You’d think that 90 years would be enough — but not for R.K. There was so much more he wanted to do. In his final years — though active — he’d often repeat to me and others that now it was up to us. I have no idea for sure what R.K. saw in me. But I am grateful that he saw something ... he saw something unique and special in everyone. It’s the way he was.”

Anderson leaves a lasting legacy. His encouragement, support, compassion, kindness, willingness to share, and his warm humor are all influences in the lives of those he left behind. Dale says, “Of course, R.K. was a walking encyclopedia of dog/cat behavior knowledge, so whenever we spent time, I might as well have received continuing education credits. But what I learned about most was how to live a life. R.K. lived on his own terms. Every day was an adventure. Many seniors fear technology — he embraced it. Many people fear change — he accepted it. Many people settle for the same old, same old — he continued to travel and seek experiences. R.K. never stopped learning, though the veterinary sessions he attended were often taught by his students. He treated dogs, cats and people with respect. If we all lived as R.K. Anderson did, our world would be a better place. And I believe our world became a better place because he was here.”

Adds Alonso, “There were never going to be enough years with R.K. on the planet, but he did not waste one single day of the time he spent here. We are all very lucky to have known him.”

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**In honor of Dr. R.K. Anderson and his life's work improving the lives of dogs, The APDT Foundation has named an annual grant cycle after him. Visit [www.apdtfoundation.org](http://www.apdtfoundation.org) for more information.**