

## **The AAALAC International Fellowship 2019**

### **“An experience of a lifetime”**

*John Waters, 2019 U.K. recipient*

At the end of July, I received a rather unexpected phone call to inform me that I had been chosen as the 2019 AAALAC International Fellow. To say I was shocked would be an understatement, although I did self-nominate for the award I did not think for one minute that I would be a worthy recipient of this prestigious award. It took a while for it to sink in, then I felt really excited as to what lay ahead. Speaking to previous recipients I knew this would be one fantastic experience.

Shortly after, I was contacted by the staff at the AAALAC Offices, to put all the arrangements in place, and to make sure I had a current passport and ESTA. The staff were brilliant replying to e-mail's dealing with my many questions. I cannot thank the staff enough at AAALAC and AALAS for arranging the trip for me.

Prior to flying out I was contacted by Dr. Rob Weichbrod (one of the original founders) and Jim Cox from Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) Janelia to enquire about my areas of interest so they could put together a comprehensive programme for my visit. As the trip drew near I received the full programme, and the full itinerary is certainly something to behold. I was also informed by Rob and Jim that I would have a couple of presentations to do during my visits.

For the first week, I would be based in Bethesda, Maryland, visiting some major facilities in the area and learning about their Animal Care and Use Programmes. The second week would be spent at the 70<sup>th</sup> National AALAS Meeting in Denver, two places I had not visited in the US.

After a long and eventful trip, I arrived at the Hyatt Bethesda Hotel at 9pm and all I wanted to do was hit my bed. As is the standard, after a really bad sleep, I decided to get up at 5am. I ventured to the gym and was looking forward to my trip into Washington. As I had never been to Washington before I wanted to cram in as much as possible, so I opted for the Trolley Tour and this was a great way to see all the sites with plenty of stops along the way. The highlight for me had to be Arlington Cemetery and I was there for the changing of the Guard, at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This was such a moving place steeped in tradition. The views over Washington were beautiful. I visited the White House and I was present when Mr Trump came “home” in his helicopter and everything went on lockdown.

Monday came around and I was picked up nice and early to start my tour of facilities, and a full programme of events. I was driven to the University of Maryland where I was met by the attending vet, and she would be my host for the day.

My first visit was to see the Barn Owls that were housed in outside aviaries. Being a bird lover this was such a fantastic experience for me, although they were a little startled due to the grass cutting that was taking place at the time on such a beautiful October's day. The University campus was vast and was a very busy place to be. I was given a brief talk via conference call, on the work that is carried out using the Owls and this was very insightful and helps appreciate the contribution these birds make to science. Continuing with the bird theme I was then introduced to the avian experts using birds to study sounds contained within a bird's song.

After a quick tour of the new facilities to house rodents it was off to the on-site bar for a spot of lunch and a chance to talk about how the US and UK differ and compare in their governance of animal work.

I was then driven over to the University's farm to have an insightful tour of the facilities, although not many procedures were taking place at the time, this facility was the one facility that closely matched Leahurst Campus where I currently work. It was a very enjoyable tour and chat, where I got chance to see the fistulated cattle for the first time. The sheep outside were having a difficult time due to the lack of rain Washington had experienced in 2019.

It was then a quick drive back to the hotel to collect an overnight bag as I would be spending the night at HHMI Janelia, hosted by Jim Cox. I had spoken to some previous winners of the award about Janelia but it is only when you experience it, can you appreciate the facility. It seems we were very fortunate as traffic was extremely light for that time of day and we even managed to arrive in the daylight, something previous recipients have not been able to. The setting that Janelia is in is just breath taking and immaculate in its appearance. The minute you enter the building you get a sense that this is such a nice environment to work. Rob and I, (after checking in), had a little look around as we waited on Jim, we came across a gallery showing a local artist's work.



***The impressive facilities at Janelia***

When Jim joined us I was treated to a wonderful meal and a great chat about the work I would experience the next day. We also chatted about non-tail handling of mice, and also some of the experiences I have had over my career as an animal tech. After the meal I retired to my hotel room (on site), it was dark by this time and I didn't realise, until I awoke what a beautiful view there was from the room. I sat and had a coffee watching a heron looking for some breakfast whilst the sun rose.

I was able to visit quite a number of areas at Janelia and it was quite apparent that this was a really nice place to work with an excellent culture of care. All the office areas were open plan and lots of shared work areas to create a very pleasant working environment. It was at Janelia that I got my first experience of neuroscience work using mice. The work was fascinating and was such a joy to see. The staff were very informative about their areas and all took time out of their day to talk to me. It was also very pleasing from my point of view to see a researcher using a tunnel to handle his mice. Lunchtime was a time set aside for me to talk to the staff at Janelia. My talk focused on my work history from trainee technician up to today. I received some really nice feedback and after some lunch it was time to meet some more people to talk about the similarities and differences between the UK and US in terms of animal usage. I was able to see the fantastic database that has been set up at Janelia that tracks all animals used within the establishment. I have seen some pretty good systems over the years but this was by far the best, and all set up in house.

After a nice chat with Jim he kindly drove me back to Bethesda. He very kindly drove me the scenic route where I could sample some of the luxury houses on show, being the residences of some sports stars and politicians. After dinner at a local sports bar it was off to bed to get some sleep before my trip to the NIH facilities.

I was met bright and early for my short trip to the NIH. After hearing the stories about the size of NIH it was finally time to experience it for myself. Nothing can prepare you for the size of the place. The security is very tight and it takes a small while to get through and get clearance.



***Plaque to recognise the contribution made by animals to advances in research***

Before lunch I was given an insight into the aquatic facilities. I have had very limited experience of fish over the years but having an interest in fish in general, this was something I was looking forward to. This was a facility to behold, I believe it is one if not the biggest fish facilities in the world, it was immense. I was introduced to (and very impressed with) their care programme in place, and the expertise within this facility can only be applauded. To be able to pick up on potential issues takes dedication and knowledge at the highest standard. I was able to witness the environmental enrichment practices in place and the area was spotlessly clean, a real credit to all who work in the facility.



***Excellent aquatic facilities at NIH***

Lunchtime I delivered a talk to the staff, about my experiences as an animal technician. The talk was well received and this was followed by some in house demonstrations on mouse handling, which the staff fully engaged in and some fun was had in "giving it a go". I had the full afternoon looking at what building 49 had to offer and it was another fantastic experience thanks to the fellowship. I wholeheartedly thank the staff and management at Building 49 for taking the time out to show me their facilities and it was a joy.

Before my first appointment Rob took time out to show me the memorial garden that has been set up at NIH in recognition of all the animals that have contributed to advances in medical research. A place where staff and researchers could come for a little reflection.

My first stop of the day was the Office of Animal Care and Use, where I got to learn all about the US system which is very similar to the UK system in lots of ways and different in others. The guys in the office were really keen to learn more about the UK structure and the roles of named persons under the act, I thank them both for giving me such an informative view of their care and use programme.

Priority One Management then treated me to a lovely evening meal at a local restaurant where we could chat on a more personal level and gain an insight into what it is like to work in our profession in the US. I was kindly driven back to my hotel and once again after a bit of time to relax with a coffee it was off to bed

The next day, (after a little bit of a sleep in) saw me once again travelling to NIH where I was very lucky to have a chat with a researcher who resided from the UK but has been in the US for many a year now working within neuroscience. I was very lucky to be treated to an in depth talk about his work, which was truly fascinating and I was able to view a trial in progress. This is something that I would not probably have been able to witness in my time as an animal technician and thanks to the fellowship I am thankful that I have. I was shown the communal play area for the non-human primates, this highlighted NIH commitment to welfare of their animals as it demonstrated careful consideration for the primates needs, and it was very impressive.



***Communal Area for NHP***

It was not long before I was being collected by Priority One for my trip to the AAALAC Offices to meet the fantastic people who make this fellowship possible and all the staff who organise the itinerary so it runs like a clockwork, and what a fantastic job they made of it.

At the Offices I was made to feel really special by everyone I met and I got to learn about AAALAC and their accreditation programme throughout the world and in return I treated the staff to a very brief introduction to pigeon racing. I received a travel bag full of goodies to bring back to the UK. Upon leaving the office I presented a gift from Liverpool and also some Cadbury's chocolate which I hope went down well.

After departing the office we then had a drive up to Baltimore to visit the Institute of Marine and Environment Technology (IMET). I was fascinated with this facility and what they are trying to achieve. In a climate that we face globally with depleting fish stocks, I thought this was a unique

and brilliant facility. It was also fantastic to see how they manage their waste from the tanks to produce a usable energy source. Time at IMET went by far too quickly but it was then off to a behind the scenes tour of the Aquarium accessing areas that the general public do not get to see.

After the tour we sampled the delights of Roy's Restaurant where the food was first class highly recommended to anybody. The drive back to Bethesda was approx. an hour and it was spent talking about experiences (and Laurel and Hardy). The experience so far was brilliant but the first week was quickly coming to an end. One more morning left of my first week, which was a visit to Astra Zeneca.

I was to give another talk here on the non-tail handling of mice to introduce the staff to how it has been successfully implemented into an animal welfare programme. A few people from other AZ facilities skyped in and after a few technical difficulties I gave the talk. I had a few questions from the skype participants and I hope I was able to answer their questions satisfactorily and they enjoyed the talk. Later that day I was able to visit the facilities and chat with animal technicians, which I really

enjoyed as we all share one thing in common.... The love of animals and a desire to improve animal welfare.

My first week was near the end and what a fantastic experience it was, I cannot recommend enough to everyone in the UK (who qualify) to apply for the fellowship. You may be like me, and someone who feels you would not be a worthy winner, but please put an application in as this is something you will remember for the rest of your life.

Saturday morning seen me travelling back to Washington Dulles Airport for my trip to Denver to experience the 70<sup>th</sup> AALAS National meeting. I arrived pretty early on Saturday afternoon and I met up with fellow Brits to have a beer or two ahead of the registration on the Sunday afternoon.

Sunday Evening was the PMI Lab Diet US and European Technician of the year, where recipients receive their accolade and give a small speech about their career paths in the industry. A massive well done to both recipients, both very well deserved.

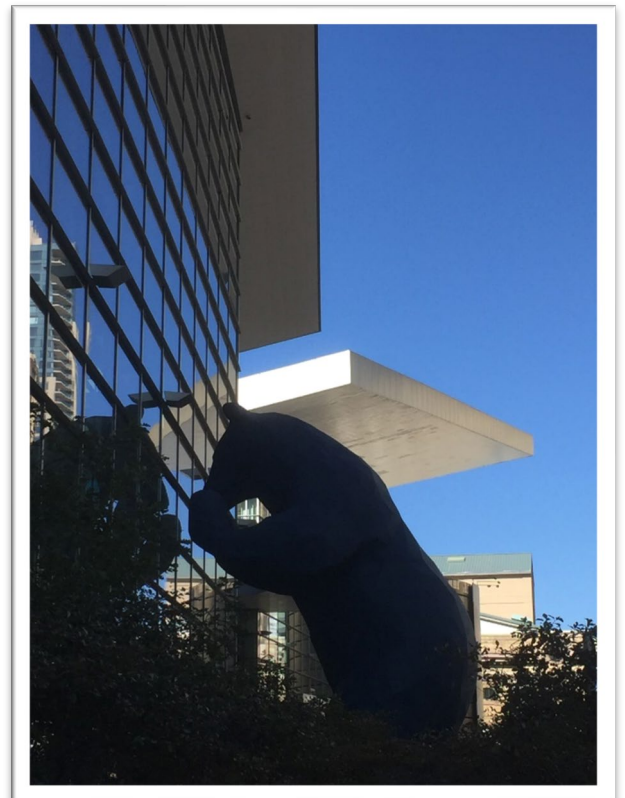
For anyone who has not visited AALAS before it's hard to put into words the scale of the meeting. There is such a variety of topics of interest that are covered and due to the size some of the interesting talks clash so you have to be selective. The quality of the talks and posters are first class and there are so many delegates in attendance you never find yourself with "just passing time."

The trade hall is immense, similar to the IAT Congress in the UK but on a much larger scale, you found yourself at times in aisles you had not been down before on previous days. There was so much to see and learn what was new within the industry.

Of an evening there was always something going on. There was a sponsored bowling event and on Wednesday evening I attended the Brits get together evening, on a terrace in Denver on a pretty cold evening, but thanks to the fire and heaters it was a very enjoyable evening with excellent company. The social side to these events is always enjoyable and thanks must go to all who sponsor the events and take time out to organise them.

Wednesday afternoon arrived and that announced the arrival of the AAALAC International luncheon where I was to receive my award. To say I was nervous about this would be an understatement, I don't think I had been that nervous since my wedding day. I sat with Jon and he was great in trying to calm me down and he did a fantastic job..... but so did the two glasses of wine beforehand.

The time came to go up... it was sink or swim time. My introduction was very humbling in its delivery and I had to try and match it somehow.



***Denver Conference Centre.***

I had wrote (and ripped up) about five different speeches but in the end I decided to just go from the heart and say it how it was. I hope this is how it came across. It was such a lovely touch for previous winners to come up to me after the speech to share their stories about their experiences in the UK, and how, they felt as honoured as I did when they visited the UK. What will stay with me forever more will be one member of the judging panel, approaching me to say that they judged my



***Award time. Myself, Jonathon Wood (Datesand) and Dr Kathryn Bayne (AAALAC International Executive Director)***

application, and I was indeed a worthy winner for 2019, which was really touching and something I will never forget....so thank you very much. I was presented with my pin badge and it is something I will wear with pride.

I had a lovely meal on Thursday evening thanks to the UK sponsors of the fellowship, (thank you Jon) it was really appreciated and your encouragement and words in the run up to the speech were really appreciated.

In conclusion to my report I can only reinforce what I said in my speech on Wednesday and that is, apply for this fantastic experience. Without the fellowship you would not see the excellent work that goes into animal care and use programmes in the US. It is an experience that will stay with you for a lifetime. As an animal technician it was fantastic to talk to fellow technicians in the US and appreciate their dedication, passion and their willingness to learn from others.

To apply and receive the award, it doesn't matter if you manage 1 or 100 staff, it doesn't matter if you manage 1 or 10 facilities you can still be selected, what is important is that you demonstrate a clear passion to improve the lives of the animals we look after on a daily basis, and display a strong willingness to help others excel within the profession. In winning the fellowship in 2019 I hope I can inspire others to apply for the fellowship, as it is truly an honour and a privilege.



***AAALAC Fellowship pin badge***