



≈ INDUSTRY WATCH ≈

# TRANSITION AT OUR OLDEST BREEDING PROGRAM

*The retirement of Steve Davis in 2017 from the University Of Vermont Morgan Farm left many wondering what would be next. Here's the answer to that question.*

By Suzy Lucine

Evolution is a key component of any thriving business. After being led by some of the greatest names in the Morgan world, like Bob Baker, Dr. Donald J. Balch, and Steve Davis, many would have thought the UVM Morgan Horse Farm would lose its position, but that has never been the case. It seems as though the more things change, the more the program soldiers on as a standard bearer for the breed.

On September 1, 2017, Stephen P. Davis retired after 13 years as head trainer and 32 years as Director of the UVM Morgan Horse Farm in Weybridge, Vermont.

“With this change in the management of the UVM Farm, we took this opportunity to look at the farm’s mission and ties to the university,” said Stephanie Dion, Assistant Dean of the UVM College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the home college of the farm. “We had big shoes to fill with Steve’s departure, but we were also confident that Steve had developed knowledge, skills, and abilities in the next generation of leadership. We used fresh eyes to review the duties of everyone associated with the farm, and divided responsibilities and duties with the best interests of the farm in mind.”

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ABOVE: The statue at sunrise (© Margot Smithson for the UVM Morgan Horse Farm).



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Unveiling of Morgan Horse Statue October 1, 1921; UVM Flash about 1971 (© Paul A.Quinn); The main barn (©Tracey Buyce).

Since the U.S. Government transferred stewardship of the farm to the university nearly 70 years ago, the mission has been to promote and preserve the historic Morgan herd, to educate the public about the importance of America's first breed, and to serve as a living laboratory for equine research.

To help chart a path for the future of the farm, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences launched a strategic action plan in April 2018, a process that included more than 40 volunteers, staff, and UVM Morgan Horse Farm advisory board members. Throughout the spring and summer, participating working groups met to formulate action plans that will serve as a guide for investments and decision-making.

This strategic action plan provides the basis for education, program development, facility upgrades, investments, and a capital campaign as they enter the next chapter in the rich story of this unique place.

The Manton Foundation awarded \$450,000 to the UVM Farm to fund essential renovations at the university's historic, 200-acre breeding farm, teaching facility, and tourist destination. Recognized on the National Register of Historic Places, the farm has been an official breeding site for the Morgan horse, Vermont's official state animal, since 1878 and is believed to be the oldest, continuous Morgan horse breeding program in the world. Today, the facilities house approximately 30 horses, student apprentices, a

breeding lab, as well as a public exhibit area and gift shop.

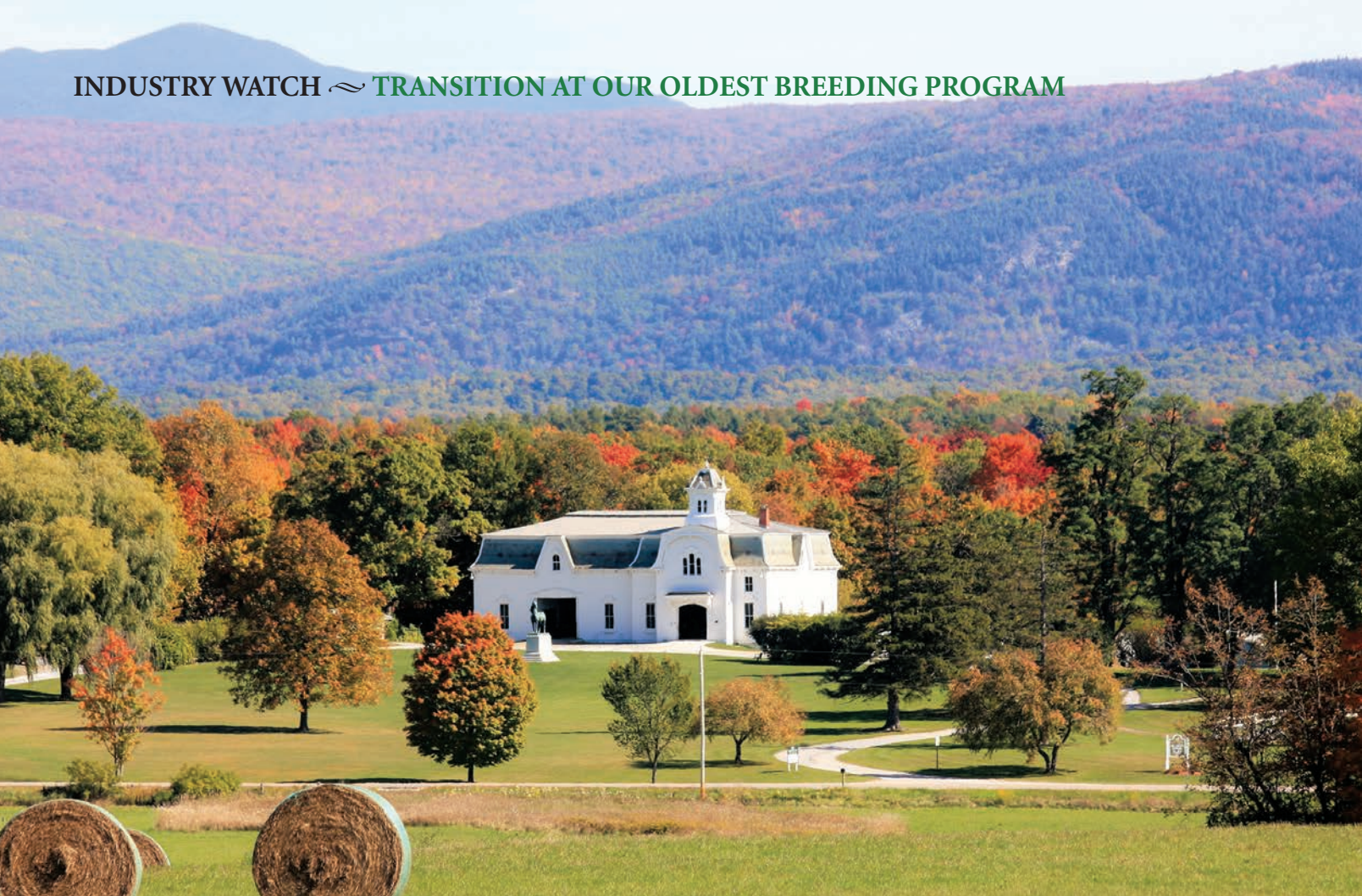
"What makes the farm unique is our dual mission of undergraduate teaching and public education, while also upholding the historical significance of the farm," said Thomas Vogelmann, Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at UVM. "Improving our infrastructure is the first step to enable expanded educational opportunities and improve the tourist experience. We are grateful to the Manton Foundation for this catalytic investment."

The new funding will support facility upgrades in the iconic, three-story main barn, which houses the majority of the horses for public viewing, an indoor arena, a classroom, historical exhibit, and gift shop. The renovations are part of a three-phased approach to renovating and restoring the farm's facilities and grounds, and represent the latest development in a new chapter unfolding in the farm's 140-year history.

Plans are to build a new equine reproduction facility with a lab and classrooms, better paddocks for stallions, and constructed in a way suitable for future expansion with help from private philanthropy.

The UVM Farm also received a \$400,000 investment from the university, which will be used for new fencing and turnout pastures. Through private philanthropy, there will be opportunities for all to participate in the campaign. There will be naming available





The main barn in fall foliage (© Margot Smithson for the UVM Morgan Horse Farm).

for buildings and stalls. Long term endorsements and gifts to the capital fund will help to build the endowment. There will also be a special section for estate planning.

A three-year capital campaign is currently underway to boost the principal of existing endowments, raise funds for one-time capital expenses, and engage loyal supporters to invest in this American treasure.

The leadership team of the UVM Farm, consisting of Stephanie Dion and Dr. Dave Townson, oversee the strategic plan, along with Margot Smithson, the Operations Coordinator of the farm, and Kim Demars, the Farm Manager.

Kim, who worked alongside Steve Davis for five years as the Equine Specialist, is the first woman the farm has had at its helm. Kim grew up in Addison County, and remembers visiting UVM when she was ten years old. Her main challenge as farm manager is to “integrate the old style of doing things with new-age thinking, one small step at a time,” she said.

Stephanie, who has served as assistant dean of the College since 2015, has worked to build links between Burlington and Weybridge, helping to bring administration and faculty down to the farm to experience it in person. Already, it has opened doors to funds for badly needed infrastructure improvements, like new pasture fencing. President E. Thomas Sullivan and his wife, Leslie Black Sullivan, have become frequent visitors to the farm, and last

spring named a foal, UVM Zealous Advocate.

Dr. Dave Townson believes that the UVM Morgan Horse Farm is positioned to become a valuable educational resource for a variety of audiences. Dave will oversee collaboration with faculty and staff to identify areas of alignment demonstrating the commitment of the farm to the university’s mission. When an undergraduate at Michigan State University, Dave became familiar with its Arabian breeding facility.

“The students there were involved in most aspects of how the farm is operated, and from that experience could go on to careers in the equine industry,” Dave said. “We have a lot of students at UVM who are interested in horses and the farm provides a great opportunity to get some hands-on experience.”

Faculty in the UVM Animal and Veterinary Science department support Dave’s vision. Chrissy Rohan and Dr. Jenny Wilkinson, lecturers in the department, have incorporated the farm into their curriculum. Chrissy’s Equine Management class travels to the farm to apply the skills they have learned in the classroom. Students have responded positively to this experience.

“Going to the Morgan Horse Farm is one of the best things I’ve done for a class during my time at UVM,” one student said. “Being able to get so much hands on experience is something that most people would not get.”

“I feel lucky to be able to travel to the Morgan Horse Farm,”



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**TOP:** 2017 foals in an early December snow storm. **INSETS (LEFT TO RIGHT):** 2018 colt (UVM Jubilant x UVM Halcyon); Apprentice intern and UVM Valedictorian (Town Assets x UVM Nightingale) (© Margot Smithson for the UVM Morgan Horse Farm).

said another student. “It’s a great experience to see how a breeding facility runs. It ties in with so much of our class material.”

At the heart of education lies the UVM Morgan Horse Farm’s Apprenticeship Program. This program has offered participants a yearlong, hands on learning experience while providing the farm with valuable support and capacity. Since the program first began in the 1970s, more than 200 apprentices have gained experience in all aspects of life at the UVM farm.

The farm leadership has re-envisioned this valuable program and will add a 15-credit internship available to university students. Apprentices and interns will live at the historic farm and be paid a stipend. A newly created position will oversee these programs. This academic coordinator will supervise four to six apprentices and/or interns to include training in farm management practices, equine management, foaling, breeding, and farm safety.

Margot Smithson became the Operations Coordinator in





Cavalry Day 2018 (© Margot Smithson for the UVM Morgan Horse Farm).

2017. A native of Middlebury, Margot worked at the farm during high school and college. Currently, Margot oversees tourism and promotion, business management and development.

From May through October, she is available to give guided tours of the farm and gift shop. The farm averages about 8,000 visitors a year. On these tours, Margot educates the public about the history of the Morgan breed, its uses throughout history and today.

Margot promotes UVM through the farm's website and Facebook page, as well as on the farm activities throughout the year. The farm has been a member of the Vermont Attraction Association for about 50 years. "There's always room for growth through education and promotion," Margot said.

"The more I've become familiar with the history of the farm, I'm so grateful to get to come here every day to work," Margot said. "My goals include sustaining the future of the farm, and to continue to engage new people in learning about Morgans and this hidden treasure, the UVM Morgan Horse Farm. The future of the farm is important to the state and within our own Morgan community.

"There's a lot to do to make this happen," Margot continued. "With careful planning and development, there are many opportunities to expand our tourism base."

Public farm events open throughout the year include foal days on Saturdays in June when mares and foals are turned out in the outdoor arena. This event also offers great photo opportunities for

the tourists. An information booth is available so guests can learn about the 2018 foals and the early life of a Morgan horse. The farm also hosts a tack sale early in the spring. In July, a day is dedicated to local 4-H members who can learn about Morgan horses, the farm, and horses in general. In October, a Cavalry Day is held with Civil War reenactments and demonstrations.

There's also a day set aside to welcome the university community, including faculty from the main campus as well as students and their families. The Open House Day is held in August, and is a wonderful family annual event. The UVM Morgans are on display to demonstrate their versatility and heritage.

The annual foal give away raffle and the Day of the Morgan Open House are held together on October 27, which the Governor of Vermont proclaimed the Day of the Morgan.

After a one-year hiatus from the show ring, staff from the UVM Farm competed in local shows and fairs to bring exposure to the farm. And, through the generosity of a good friend of the farm, they were able to send a promising young stallion, UVM Willoughby, to Broadmoor for training and showing. In his debut season, UVM Willoughby was the Junior Park Harness Champion at both Southern States and New England, and Grand Champion Stallion at the New York Morgan Show. Willoughby was shown under the direction of Dwayne Knowles and Mike Goebig.

"The UVM Farm's leadership team all realize how important the farm is to the future of the Morgan breed as well as to the



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**TOP:** Visitors at Vermont Day. **INSETS (LEFT TO RIGHT):** UVM Abington and Kim Demars and a petting opportunity at Vermont Day 2018  
(© Margot Smithson for the UVM Morgan Horse Farm).

university,” said Nina Quinn, a member of the UVM Farm Advisory Board since 2000, but with an even longer family involvement. Her late father, Paul, was asked to sit on the Advisory Board by Dr. Balch in the early 1970s. When he passed away in 1978, his wife, Polly, was asked to fill his position. When Polly stepped down in 2000, Nina was nominated to fill her position. “The leadership team is also utilizing outside knowledge from the Morgan world, which will help maintain the long-term health and stability of the UVM Farm.”

“It’s also important that the Morgan world supports the UVM Farm,” Nina continued. “This can be done in many ways, from

financial support to continuing education for the leadership team and UVM Farm staff members.

“The stars are all aligned to move forward with an exciting future for the UVM Farm.”

“It’s an honor to be here and perpetuate the breed,” said Kim Demars. “To be involved in the next chapter of the UVM Morgan Horse Farm is pretty special and important. This place has a rich history, and important legacy, and we are all committed to continuing that legacy and doing the best we can for these amazing horses.” ■