

# INSIDE TUCSON BUSINESS

## For Jim Boulay and Barbara Gores, the challenge is sealing the cracks

By Gary Hirsch

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As businesses contract, Jim Boulay and Barbara Gores, owners of Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson are adding 22,000 square feet, tripling the size of their animal hospital. “We’re thinking five or 10 years down the line,” says Boulay. “With 87 employees working elbow-to-elbow we need space to provide quality care, including the addition of Tucson’s first MRI for animals.”

Partners in business and in life, Boulay and Gores married in November last year. “We did everything backwards,” says Gores. “We started as student-teacher, became colleagues and then Jim became my boss. “

Boulay, a native Tucsonan, attended veterinary school in Colorado. From there he moved to Boston’s Angel Memorial Animal Hospital for his residency and work as chief of surgery. Born in Rochester, Minnesota., Gores attended Gonzaga University in Washington state and received her DVM degree at Washington State University. Always knowing she would be a veterinarian, Gores completed her surgical training at Angel where she met Boulay.

In 1998, Boulay purchased a surgical practice in Tucson and invited Gores to work with him.

“I hadn’t planned to go to the Southwest,” says Gores. “But it’s not about the location; it’s about the people.”

Gores accepted Boulay’s offer, about which he smiles and says, “I think I had an ulterior motive when I tried to get Barb out here.”

She joined him in Tucson in 1999. Four years later Boulay lost his lease. The two considered leaving Tucson but stayed, partly for their employees — a group of specialists wanting a place to practice who also very much wanted them to stay. They found 800 square-feet of temporary space and Boulay and Gores started planning their hospital.

After 18 months - record time for planning and construction - the hospital opened. In 2006 they won the Veterinary Economics Hospital Design Competition Merit Award.

“I almost felt guilty about it,” says Gores. “Some people take 10 years to design the hospital of their dreams and we won this award in 2006, two years after we opened.”

As a child “I was awestruck by Christiaan Barnard’s first heart transplant and knew I wanted to do that work,” says Boulay. But he struggled with certain requirements. “I always had animals around and so I shifted to



Barbara Gores and Jim Boulay are in front of their building with Charlie who is currently admitted to the clinic. Janelle Montenegro photo

veterinary medicine. Subsequently a fabulous surgeon at Angel pointed me toward surgery and there I stayed.”

For Gores, her mother suggested dental hygiene. But with that she wondered, “Why can’t I be the doctor? I always knew I wanted to be a vet. When my parents were downsizing and divvying up the childhood photos, every photo of me includes a family pet or some stray I picked up along the way.”

Both accomplished surgeons, they prefer different parts of the business. Gores, who does promotion and marketing likes detailed schedules and can organize just about anything. Boulay keeps the staff happy, which is fine by him. “My value is as a surgeon and as a front guy. We each do what we do best,” he says.

To succeed in business Boulay counsels patience.

“Be slow to speak, listen well to people who know more than you do and avoid mistakes others have made,” he says. “We all crash and burn but we shouldn’t crash and burn on the same thing over and over. Being in business takes perseverance and guts.”

Gores advises you “need a good support system — people who will cheer you on. Jim and I are in this together. It takes confidence and tenacity — knowing I can make this business work no matter what.”

She credits her belief in their vision.

“I want to know I am making a difference in people’s lives. I want pets and pet owners to enjoy the experience of coming here. It’s the little things, like pet exam rooms with low windows in the doors so the pets can look out and feel comfortable.”

Gores likes to think ahead and plan for contingencies. “As surgeons we’re trained that way. Something inevitably goes wrong and you need to be able to get back on track quickly.”

Boulay suggests you have to fully appreciate the planning and decision-making that’s required. “I was naïve when we started. The details can be mind boggling. Like who’s going to order the pens?”

Growth creates challenges. “We want to keep things from slipping through the cracks,” Gores says. “Maintaining consistent customer experiences is vital and so the challenge is sealing the cracks. We set the bar high and intend to keep it there.”

When things get crazy Gores says she “goes and finds a little puppy with a good wag to the tail. That does it! When I get a card with a crayon drawing saying ‘thanks for giving us back Fluffy’ — that’s what keeps me going.”

Boulay and Gores want Tucsonans to know that “if you need emergency, advanced care Veterinary Specialty Center of Tucson is the place. It’s open 24/7 and specialists work full-time under the same roof.”

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